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THERE CAME A SHARP SWISH IN THE AIR, AND BEFORE THE GOLD BOWIE KID COULD THWART IT, A RAWHIDE LASSO SETTLED OVER HIS HEAD AND SHOULDERS.

OR, Old Wildfire's Treasure.

BY ARTHUR C. GRISSOM.

CHAPTER I. THE KNIFE-HUNTER.

ONE September day a horseman was riding at a rapid pace over one of the wildest and rockiest districts in the gold regions of Arizona.

Rough looking he was, a typical Arizonian. His features were dark and swarthy and his figure stalwart, and he bestrode his clean-limbed animal with the easy grace of one well accustomed to the saddle.

Huge spurs adorned the high-topped boots that incased the bottoms of a pair of brown-colored pantaloons, which were met at the top by a jacket which had once been gray, but

which was now greasy and dark. Beneath this garment was the red shirt peculiar to the miner, and at the union of jacket and breeches a wide leathern belt encircled his waist, containing the inevitable bowie and revolvers.

Long, dark hair that touched a pair of massive shoulders was covered by a gray sombrero, of wide and flexible brim, and this completed the mountain rider's attire.

He was following in an easterly direction a rocky but well-defined trail, which led through a wild and rough portion of country.

But this latter fact did not seem to bother the Arizonian, for he never once looked behind and kept his horse in a steady gallop.

The sparks flew from the flinty trail as the iron-shod hoofs beat a regular tattoo upon it.

Suddenly the rider jerked his horse backward and brought him to a standstill, and for the first time he turned in his saddle and glanced back along the trail over which he had passed.

"Wal, I'll be cussed!" he ejaculated, with a broad accent of disgust, glancing first ahead and then behind him. "Hyer I am inside o' two mile ov Ruby's, an' never till this minit thought ov it! Didn't Ruby tell ther boys thet he would hev biz'niss in ther Eureka kentry fer ther nex' five days, so ov course he's not ter home— But, le's see; ter-day's ther fifth day since he said thet; it's barely possible Bowie Point's king-pin ar' back. It's two hours past noon, an' Bowie ar' four mile in ther rear. Ruby Ralph had ought ter know ov this pair ov visitors thet's about ter step inter ther burg. It's strange none o' ther boys thought ov Ruby's trip; they only thought ov his bein' wanted in Bowie Point, an' so I war detailed ter notify 'im. Wal, I'm so near now, I'm goin' on; I kin at least leave ther sign thet'll fetch 'im ter Bowie when he gets back. Move on, boss!"

Down came the huge Mexican spurs, and the horse, with a snort of pain, plunged forward.

Twenty minutes later the big rider drew rein in front of a large log cabin, situated at the edge of a fertile valley.

"Thet's Ruby's ranch," said Bowie Point's messenger. "We'll see if ther dead-shot owner ar' ter home."

He drew from his belt, as he guided his horse within reach of the house, one of the heavy revolvers he carried there, and grasping the barrel, he leaned forward to rap upon the door, but before the upraised weapon had time to descend, the heavy door swung open, and the horseman straightened himself in his saddle with a startled oath.

On the threshold of Ruby Ralph's cabin stood as nearly a perfect specimen of youthful humanity as it had ever been the fierce man's lot to see. What was more surprising, he extended into the rough's face a revolver at full cock!

"Thunder!" ejaculated the visitor, all his fierceness gone for once, "yer gives a feller a rather startlin' reception, seems ter me."

"Yes, and a warn one, if necessary," was the response, with a threatening glance. "This is Ruby Ralph's home, but I'm receivin' visitors just at present. If yer have no gift-edged cards about you, you might hand in yer handle without troublin' pasteboard."

Cool and erect stood the youth in the doorway, his slight figure and handsome face making quite a striking contrast to the burly giant on the horse but a few steps away.

"I'm Fierce Frank," said the disconcerted horseman, from ther flourishin' burg ov Bowie Point, which, I believe, my young persimmon, hez never hed the honor ov a visit from—who?"

"Foxfoot."

"Foxfoot, eh? 'Pears ter me I've heard thet name afore. Hain't yer from ther southern Eureka kentry?"

"Well?"

"Hain't yer thet kid, the ranchero, thet owns ther famous gold bowie?"

"When I'm ter home!"

Fierce Frank's eager eyes scanned the young ranchero's belt.

"Oh, it's not there, angel of Bowie Point! Did I tell you thet I came hyer to see the meanest sneak-thief in Arizona—Ruby Ralph? I want to see him *bad*!"

"Hez he got yer treasure?" asked the desperado.

"Hez he? Two days ago in Gold Eagle City the skunk of Bowie's Point got the drop, an' forced me to deliver that knife to him. I made the Eureka country too hot for him after that, an' I supposed he had come back to his valley ranch. Thet's why I'm hyer!"

Fierce Frank's eyes twinkled.

"I want ter see Ruby Ralph myself," he said; "I s'pose, Foxfoot, that my biz'niss ar' a little more pressin' than yourn; you'd better go back

ter yer Eureka ranch—yer'll never git any satisfaction out ov Ruby Ralph."

Foxfoot smiled, though his eyes flashed determination.

"I've come to try," he assured the rough. "I'll win back the knife or lose my life in the attempt!"

The revolver the boy ranchero held had not been lowered since the moment the door swung open.

Fierce Frank was enraged at being so persistently covered and gnashed his teeth a moment in silence. Suddenly he leaned forward and hissed:

"See hyer, my bloomin' pink, if yer won't take my advice, an' go back ter yer southern ranch, I want ter extend ye an invite ter come ter Bowie Point. We'll make it interestin' for yer, boy! You've raised yer weapon ag'in ther nex' best man thet ever entered Bowie Point, an' don't offer ter drop it er 'pologize; thet means *death*, thar!"

Something like a smile overspread Little Foxfoot's features.

"Who's the best man, Mister Fierce Frank?"

"Ruby Ralph!"

"Well, it may be that I'll accept yer invite sometime soon. Just at present I want to see the skunk you call Ruby Ralph, an' wherever his trail leads there will I be found, rest assured of that! If it takes me to Bowie, I'll be there, an' I'll be prepared for any kind of a picnic *you* may wish to enjoy."

"Yer huntin' fer yer gold bowie?"

"Yes!" flashed the boy. "I'm a Knife-Hunter now; that's my special biz, as yer gang will find out."

"Wal, all I've got ter say," said the desperado, gathering up the reins, "you've undertook ther biggest job ever tackled in this kentry! Why, thar are fifty men who'd almost give ther right hand ter possess that treasure. I'm one ov thet fifty, Foxfoot, fer all I've never seen it! If thet sticker's ever brought ter Bowie it'll never leave while Fierce Frank's thar ter fight fer it!"

There was no reply to this from the youth in the doorway, and a moment after Fierce Frank's horse's head was turned.

"Good by, Foxfoot!" he sent over his shoulder.

"You've covered me ter-day, but, by blazes! I'll make yer pay fer it if yer ever come ter Bowie Point! Good-by, never-again-ter-be owner ov ther gold-handled bowie!"

Foxfoot heard the chuckle that followed this as the rough rode away.

He made no attempt to stop him, although the revolver was still ready in his hand.

"If there were five hundred instead of fifty men in this country who want that knife, I'd find it just the same!" said the resolute lad when Fierce Frank had disappeared on the back trail.

"Anything that man can say would have no more effect on my purpose than a coyote bark. I came to this country to recover my stolen knife, and I shall secure it or lose my life in the attempt. I've sworn it! The gold in that handle is every ounce that I worked out of the vein I at first thought was so rich; and I'll not be cheated out of that hard-earned treasure."

With the last words he stepped outside the cabin, closing the door behind him.

Half an hour before, when he had rapped upon the door and nobody came to open it, he had entered boldly to find the knife-thief; but the cage was empty, and he was just in time to receive the rough messenger from Bowie Point, which lay a half-dozen miles to the west.

"Ruby Ralph has not shown up here, I suppose, since I saw him in Gold Eagle," said Foxfoot, as he brought forward from the grove opposite the cabin a horse of superior qualities. "One thing sure—I'll be near when he comes; though it won't do to be caught napping here after Fierce Frank's visit."

A moment later a youth not over nineteen, handsome and supple, and clothed in a richly embroidered jacket and Mexican pantaloons, was riding away across the valley, in which was situated the ranch owned by "the best man who had ever entered Bowie Point."

Further up the young Knife-Hunter could see the corral, and near it half a hundred grazing animals.

Ruby Ralph, it seemed, preferred to keep a ranch on a small scale in Danger Valley, as he called it, to living in the midst of his tough minions in Bowie Point.

Ten minutes' ride across the grassy plain brought the boy to where the ascent began and where the trail was winding and rocky.

Not a dozen steps had the spirited horse taken on this hard soil, when there came a sharp swish in the air, and before the Gold Bowie Kid could

thwart it, a rawhide lasso settled with the surety of fate over the head and shoulders of the young ranchero and pinioned his arms to his side.

With a startled cry he recognized his danger and attempted to throw off the tightening cord, but the next instant he was roughly jerked from his seat to the ground!

CHAPTER II.

BOWIE POINT'S VISITORS.

A TIME there was when Bowie Point was one of the most flourishing camps in the mining-districts of Arizona.

Gold had been discovered there by a wandering, half-witted miner, who could not keep secret his discovery, and soon the shanties began springing up right and left near the find, until at least a hundred could have been counted scattered amid the rocks and gulches.

There were no streets; no town had been formally laid out, and so the settlers erected their rough cabins wherever their fancies indicated.

To this new gold region flocked miners and desperate characters from all parts of the Southwest.

Of course, there was a saloon and a "hotel." "The Panther's Paw" was the most pretentious building in the "city," and was regarded by the citizens as the most important. It served the combined purposes of hotel, saloon and gaming-den, and was run by one of the worst toughs in camp, Pepper Pete.

Luny Jake, as the half-witted discoverer was called, never realized more than a dozen drinks of "tarantlar juice" from his find, and with that was content to leave Bowie Point to its fate or to its glory, which ever it might be.

Gold was found quite plentiful for a time, but like many of the mountain camps which sprung up while the gold-fever ran high, Bowie was destined to a curtailed existence.

The vein which had been thought so rich began suddenly to fail, and when this fact became generally known, the better class of miners took up their picks and shovels and decamped for other fields.

But a goodly number remained—wild, desperate fellows, who soon made for the town an unenviable reputation.

There is no "city" of Bowie Point now, nothing but the ruins of the deserted shanties and the unmarked graves on the mountain-side.

But, during the latter portion of its existence wild scenes were enacted there by its lawless citizens, more than one of whom "passed in their checks with their boots on" and with their hands on their revolvers.

During this period the events depicted in the foregoing chapter occurred, and it was just an hour after his meeting with Foxfoot, the young Knife-Hunter, at Ruby Ralph's cabin when Fierce Frank neared the eastern limits of the town, on the return from his mission to the Danger Valley ranch.

There was an eager glitter in his eyes as he urged his horse on, though he took no note of how fast he was going; his riding was purely mechanical.

He looked up suddenly and saw Bowie Point's cabins but a short distance ahead.

"Thar's Bowie!" he exclaimed, as if he had sighted it unexpectedly after a terrible journey. "By George! won't thet be news ter ther boys? If I didn't see Ruby, I heard what war letter, an' what'll make every feller's eyes in ther camp twinkle. Oh, Foxfoot, ov Eureka ranch! we've heard ov thet golden bowie afore. We've got it now, an' we don't perpcse ter let it go!"

"Got what, Fierce Frank?"

Fierce Frank gave a startled exclamation as he drew rein.

"Ruby!"

Ten steps away beside the trail, Bowie Point's "best man" sat erect in his saddle, and smiled quizzingly into the messenger's face.

"Wal, yes, Ruby. What's thet you've got, pard?"

Fierce Frank hesitated for a moment, while Ruby Ralph gazed steadily at him.

"Why, ther golden bowie," he said, at last; "you've got it, an' ov course, that means Bowie Point. It'll make ther camp famous!"

"No, but I hev'n't got it!" gritted the rancher, who was a giant in stature and strength.

"Hev'n't? Ther owner himself said yer had!"

"Ther meanest skunk in ther Rockies war waitin' on ther trail back thar, an' seein' it in my belt, he made me keel under like a tender-hoof and fork it over. By Jehosaphat! thar's vengeance waitin' fer thet thief! No man comes ter Bowie Point an' robs a citizen with impunity like thet!"

"Who war it, Ruby?" asked Fierce Frank, madly.

Both seemed to forget that that very thing was done in Gold Eagle "City" two days before.

"Old Wildfire!" was the grated response, with an oath.

"Heavens! Ruby, you must 'ave been covered by a perfect cyclone ov death! I've heard ov him. Yer came on ther east trail from Gold Eagle?"

"Yes," said the swarthy giant; "but fer certain reasons I switched over onto ther north trail a piece back. I run from ther fryin'-pan inter ther fire."

"Thet accounts fer it!" vociferated Fierce Frank. "By the 'tarnal wildcats, Ruby! Vengeance ar' nearer ter hand than yer'd supposed. Old Wildfire's dart r, thet piece ov humanity more famous than ther golden bowie, is goin' ter be in Bowie Point ter-night! She's been off ter ther States somewhar, an' Old Wildfire met her at Nugget City, an's takin' her home by way, of course, of Bowie Point. I've jest been ter Danger Valley ter tell yer, but instead ov seein' you, I saw ther han'somest little cyclone thet ever struck this kentry! He wants ter see yer, Ruby."

"I kin guess who ther visitor ar', Fierce Frank. But, ther boy hed better go back; if he follers Ruby Ralph, he'll meet with no mercy. When ther gold bowie's at stake, he don't know what a desprit man'd do."

"Thet's a fact, Ruby; I told 'im thet, but he only laughed, an' said probably he'd be in Bowie in a day er so."

"Let 'im come, but I'll not guarantee 'im a safe return ter his Eureka ranch! He might find his gold bowie in a way he didn't expect. I've sworn thet thet bowie shall be my property! Hevn't all ov us heard ov thet knife fer two year, Fierce Frank?"

The speaker's eyes blazed.

"Bowie Camp hez wanted it thet long, Ruby."

"Yes; I went ter ther Eureka kentry fer it, an' by Jehosaphat! I got it! Old Wildfire'll hev ter cave ov Ruby Ralph gits ther drop, which he will of ther thief comes ter Bowie ter-night. Who said he war comin'?"

"Desperate Dan," replied the fierce man. "He saw 'im in Nugget City two days ago, an' Wildfire told 'im that war his plan. Bowie Point ar' nearly directly on ther trail, yer know, between Nugget City an' Gold Eagle, an' ther Panther's Paw ar' a darned sight better than sleepin' on ther ground. They must hev been on ther march fer Bowie when yer overtook 'em; did yer see ther Gold Eagle ang'l?"

"Nary," said Ruby Ralph. "I supposed ther mean skunk hed jest come hyer ter rob me ov ther gold treasure. Thar'll be fun in Camp Bowie if they come thar ter-night, Fierce Frank! Let's move on ter Pepper Pete's; my whistle hezn't been wet since last night."

The spurs were plied, and the two dark-faced and bronzed Arizonians, two desperadoes who were fit companions for each other, who were dressed similarly, and armed to the teeth, rode forward, side by side, into the mountain camp, wherein dwelt half a hundred man-tigers, as wild and desperate as themselves.

An hour later, over the spot where the north and the east trails leading to Bowie Point united, another couple, a man and a girl, rode in from the north, and advanced toward the main part of Bowie Point's collection of cabins.

When we say that from the belt of one the beautiful gold handle of a ten-inch bowie protruded, the reader may guess who they are.

Dark and muscular was the man who had forced Ruby Ralph to "keel under," but his face bore a different expression from that which characterized the roughs of whom Ruby was king.

There was the unmistakable look of integrity which a life in the Arizonian mountains, with its exposures and hardships and constant activity, could not efface.

One would hardly guess that the fair being at his side was connected to him by relationship's tie, so brown and rough was he.

But, never was a daughter of the southwest hills more beautiful than Old Wildfire's only child, Rosa, who rode with him into the mining-town in the wake of Fierce Frank and Ruby Ralph.

"Thet's Bowie Poi-t," said Old Wildfire to his companion, for the second time since they had come in sight of it. "That town sprung into existence soon after you left, two year ago. Probably you're the first bit of female humanity thet ever penetrated this camp, Rosa."

"It's a rough-looking place," said the girl.

"And thar's rough characters in it," replied her father. "Ruby Ralph, the man I took this knife from on the trail back thar, holds full sway hyer. I wouldn't have made the big rancher deliver had I known who he was, but never havin' seen him before, I didn't know 'im from Luny Jake. I don't want to make any enemies, especially like Ruby Ralph, while you are with me, pet. I saw the gold bowie that belongs to the Eureka kentry in his belt an' I knew thet he had stolen it. I saw 'kill' in his eyes when he handed out the knife, an' some-thin' about 'Ruby Ralph's revenge' escaped his lips."

"He won't attempt to harm you, papa?"

"Why not? But if he does, he'll find me ready to defend the richest treasure in Arizona with my life! You haven't forgot how to shoot, have you, little girl? Two years ago you could plant a bullet almost anywhere I could."

"I haven't forgotten; here's the same little weapon you gave me and taught me with," she answered; producing a beautiful silver-mounted revolver.

"That's it! I thought thet you wouldn't lose yer grip on what is needed so much in this kentry. Jest keep it handy, Rosa; you may need it—that is—well—there *might* be such a thing, you know. We shouldn't have come to Bowie Point at all, after our trouble with its ruling spirit, but ov course you must have shelter. Nugget City—northwest—is just two days' journey from Gold Eagle—east—an' Bowie Point is half-way between them—off the direct trail somewhat, but a convenient place to stop at fer the night. You're not afraid, Rosa?"

"No," she answered, as he looked lovingly into her face.

The trail which struck Bowie Point from a northwesterly direction, but which the citizens generally termed the "north trail," led straight to the door of the Panther's Paw, for there was where the thirsty pilgrim generally made for first.

On into Ruby Ralph's domain rode the strangely contrasted pair, the cabins growing thicker and the trail wider as they advanced.

All at once Old Wildfire grasped the bit of his companion's horse and both animals were brought to a halt.

"We'll go to no Panther's Paw this night, Rosa," he said, firmly. "We would stand no show there against Ruby Ralph and his gang. I know the character ov the place. But I've a friend in camp an' I'm sure he'll let us occupy his cabin to-night. It's Desperate Dan; he was in Nugget City two days ago, and I had occasion to do him a favor; we'll ride down to the Panther's Paw an' ask 'im. Woe unto Ruby Ralph if he harms a hair ov your head this night!"

The speaker's teeth shut with a snap over the last word and his eyes flashed dangerously.

The horses were again urged forward and silence fell between the two travelers.

Old Wildfire had avoided Bowie Point on his way to Nugget City a few days before, and this was his first visit to the notorious camp, but he knew the character of the place and of the citizens in it.

When they came in sight of a building where a dozen loafers stood in front of the door, instinct told him that was the Panther's Paw.

There was no hesitating now; the citizens had caught sight of them and eagerly watched their approach from Pepper Pete's door.

At last they drew rein not ten steps from the crowd and allowed their gaze to wander over the curious faces.

A shout of delighted admiration went up from the roughs as they feasted their eyes upon the fairest rose that had ever bloomed in the Arizonian mountains.

This brought to the door from the inside a man whom Old Wildfire just then didn't want to see.

There was a scowl on his dark face as he surveyed the new arrivals.

It was Ruby Ralph.

CHAPTER III.

CATAMOUNT SAM AND PARD.

LITTLE FOXFOOT had no sooner touched the ground than he leaped to his feet and straight toward the man who held the end of the unerring lasso thirty feet away.

He had not been much injured by the fall from his horse, but there were rage and resentment in his eyes, and, although his arms, in spite of his endeavors to free himself, were still helpless at his side, he was not one to quickly submit to brute capture.

Not ten feet of the intervening distance had been passed, when a pair of rough hands caught

the young Knife-Hunter, and he was tripped forward upon his face.

"Thar, invader ov Danger Valley!" grated a hoarse voice above him, as a heavy knee was planted upon his back. "Ruby Ralph's men want ter see yer fer darin' ter penetrate ther private sanctum ov the boss rancher ov this district. Take his weapons, Injun, an' then cover 'im when I let 'im up. Take off ther rope, too; we'll mow 'im down if he makes a move!"

The Indian who had so deftly lassoed the young Knife-Hunter, quickly disarmed the captive and removed the binding rawhide.

Then the heavy knee was removed from his back and the boy arose.

His breath had been almost knocked out of him by the two falls, and he leaned up against his faithful hcr e, which had halted a few steps away when his rider had been jerked from his back.

Foxfoot's eyes flashed angrily when he turned to his two captors.

The Indian held in his hand a ready revolver, and his companion stood near him with folded arms.

"We're Ruby's men, ez I said afore," was the grim explanation, as the man glared into the boy rancher's face. "We seed yer comin' from ther ranch down thar, an' we concluded it war our biz ter see what war wanted."

"You've taken a desperate mean an' underhand way to find out," was the mad reply. "I could have told you what was wanted without the use of that infernal lasso!"

"Thet may be, but ther Injun an' me hez a way ov doin' things. Ruby Ralph don't leave us ter guard his ranch for nothin', you bet! Are yer a friend ov Ruby's?"

"Friend?—no!" flashed the boy. "My visit hyer means war to the knife!"

"We thought so; et's like a lam' fightin' ther lion. When yer fight Ruby Ralph yer fight every man in this region. Ruby's not hyer ter receive yer, but Catamount Sam an' his pard, Flash-Eye, are. We're ther daisies thet protect this ranch, an' we ropes in all such ez you."

"Catamount Sam, eh? Well, I have some advice fer you, Catamount, an' I'll not charge you a cent for it. There's goin' to be war between Eagle City an' Bowie Point, an' I advise you to leave Foxfoot, Gold Eagle's representative, alone; you're liable to win a taste of the gold bowie when it's found."

"Ther gold bowie?—what ov it?" exclaimed the desperado, and there was an eager light on his face that told the subject was not new to him. "Is ther gold killer lost?"

"Yes; that's why I'm hyer! I'm in search of the prettiest man-killer that Arizona ever held!"

"Ruby got it, then?—from the boy owner who, I've heard, knows so well how ter handle his beauty blade."

"Yes, he got it—the boss thief! So you've heard about ther owner?"

"Scres of times. Ther gold bowie hez made 'im famous all over this kentry. I'd almost give my right hand ter own thet knife!"

Foxfoot's eyes blazed fiercely. Was everybody he met, as Fierce Frank had said, willing to be maimed for life to secure the gold-handled bowie? Had he to fight these men who would risk so much to regain possession of his own rightful property?

But he had said he would win or die, and one acquainted with his past record would not have doubted his word.

Catamount Sam, unconsciously repeating Fierce Frank's words, was the second man in the last half-hour who had offered to exchange his right hand for the famous blade, but the fact did not lessen the boy's determination in the least.

It told him, however, that he had desperate men to deal with, and that desperate measures alone could win back for him his stolen prize.

"Well, you'll never have it!" he gritted, furiously, to Catamount Sam. "That knife belongs to me! I'm Foxfoot, its famous owner, an' the man thet touches it is my deadly foe! Keep out of the struggle, is my advice. The whole Eureka country is roused over the theft, an' if I don't track down the Bowie in two days, the men of Gold Eagle are comin' over to chaw Bowie Point but what it's returned. It's death to the man that holds the knife when they come!"

Catamount Sam smiled grimly. "They'll hev a hefty job chawin' Bowie up," he said, through his teeth. "Thar's not a man thar thet wouldn't fight fer thet bowie. They've been speculatin' on capturin' it fer months, an' now Ruby Ralph hez stepped inter ther den an'

walked off with ther prize, it'll be hand ter hand afore it goes back ter Gold Eagle. Yer knows Bowie's reputation, Foxfoot—she never does nothin' by halves—What's wrong, Flash-Eye?"

The Indian herder had been listening silently to the conversation, when all at once his cunning eyes detected a suspicious glitter at the place on the saddle where Foxfoot rested his hand.

Without replying to Catamount Sam's question he advanced upon the boy, cocking the weapon in his hand as he did so.

"Drop shooter, Foxfoot!" he hissed. "Flash-Eye see—drop it!"

He came to a halt suddenly before the words were hardly out of his mouth.

He was looking into the threatening muzzle of the shooter he wanted dropped!

"You'd best examine saddle-pockets the next time you attempt to disarm a man from Gold Eagle!" the Knife-Hunter sent over the glistening barrel to his surprised captors. "The tables are turned clean over an' I've got the drop on you both! Throw down that shooter in yer hand, Flash-Eye, also my belt; and be very careful about yer movements; I stand behind one of the deadliest sixes in Arizona! There, thet'll do, though you fellers needn't chaw me up with those mad eyes o' yours. Hands above-board now! I'll plug the first one o' you that attempts to draw a weapon! Face about, an' march fer yer den!"

Every word seemed a threat and the flash of those dark eyes was not to be mistaken.

Only too well did Catamount Sam and his red pard, Flash-Eye, know that it was to their interest to strictly obey the young mountain trapper.

Men had often told them of Foxfoot of Eureka ranch and of the wonderful manner in which he handled his justly famous weapons.

With subdued oaths they turned abruptly, and side by side strode down the hill and into the valley.

"They know what's expected of them," the youth said, grimly, as he picked up his belt where Flash-Eye dropped it. "They know it means death to turn around while they're in range. They're careful also to keep those hands elevated. They turned the wrong card when they picked up Foxfoot of Gold Eagle."

He mounted his waiting animal, still keeping his hand upon his revolver and his eye upon the stalwart twain who at every step neared the rough cabin at the opposite side of Danger Valley.

There was a smile of triumph on the youthful trapper's face as he noted the outcome of the recent episode.

"They took me at a disadvantage," he smiled to himself; "but men will find that I'm liable to sling the wrong card on the board before the game's played. They'll also find thet I came here on business bent and am not to be trifled with."

For a few minutes longer he watched from the back of his horse the receding pards, and then he turned and galloped up the mountain.

Once he turned back and looked down at the men he had defeated.

Their faces were toward him now, and he was just in time to see Catamount Sam raise a revolver and send after him a ringing shot.

Foxfoot did not flinch.

He estimated that he was not out of range, and he was correct; the bullet fell short of its mark.

"He wanted the satisfaction of having one shot," he said, as Catamount Sam, seeing that his shot took no effect, turned on his heel and strode on by the side of Flash-Eye. "He waited however, until it was entirely too late, contrary to his sweet will. I'll move on again."

After a little while he came to a grassy plateau on the mountain-side, and here, after a moment's thought, he dismounted and picketed his horse.

From here he had a fair view of the beautiful valley, which lay several hundred feet beneath him in a picturesque spot among the mountains.

"I'll remain here till nightfall," was his conclusion from his elevated resting spot, "and if Ruby Ralph comes I'm bound to see him. If he has not arrived in Danger Valley by that time, I'm goin' to strike fer Bowie Point. I've never been there but I know its location—likewise, its reputation. I've heard it's a sort of owl's nest—thet night's the best time fer makin' calls. I'm likely to make a call there to-night!"

CHAPTER IV.

ANOTHER COUNTRY HEARD FROM.

THAT taking his beautiful child to spend the night in the midst of those rough men at Bowie

Point was a dangerous proceeding, none knew better than Old Wildfire himself.

Rosa had been attending school in the East for two years, and on her return home Wildfire had met her at Nugget City, as the overland stage came no further than that point.

It had been a hard ride for the girl that day over the rough trail, and now it was imperative she should have shelter and rest.

Ordinarily, Old Wildfire would have had no hesitation in taking his daughter to Bowie Point, for, rough as were the men who made up the camp, a rude sense of honor made them, as a class, always respectful in the presence of a lady; but he had made a powerful and revengeful enemy in Ruby Ralph—what might not Bowie Point's King do to gain his revenge?

Old Wildfire was not afraid for himself, but he did have misgivings for the absolute safety of that being at his side dearer to him than his own life.

However, it was too late to retreat now; they were in the very heart of Ruby Ralph's domain.

"Woe unto him if he harms a hair ov her head!" were the unspoken words that rose to the old man's lips many times.

From the back of his horse Wildfire gazed over the crowd in front of Pepper Pete's, in search of the familiar face of Desperate Dan.

Was he there?

Yes, he sighted him in a moment, and when his name was spoken, the man stepped quickly forward and walked by the side of the strangers' horses down the trail, and out of hearing of Pepper Pete's door.

"We've concluded not to occupy the Panther's Paw to-night," said Old Wildfire, as he drew rein twenty-five yards from the place he mentioned.

Desperate Dan laid his hand on the Eureka man's leg, and looked up into his face.

"Thet'll displease ther boys," he said, warningly. "They've been excited 'bout seein' ther Mountain Rose all day."

"They knew we war comin', then?"

"Yes, I told 'em."

Old Wildfire's face grew dark as he glanced toward the crowd, which had increased to full a score.

"Oh, they're a daisy lot!" he said between his teeth. "So they want to see Rosa, eh, Dan?"

"Thet's it."

"Wal, she's not hyer on exhibition."

"No, Wildfire, but she's ther first bit ov female kaliker thet ever struck ther diggin's. It's natural they'd want a healthy peep at sech a flower."

"But I've got a foe in thet crowd, an' I want to put ther girl as near out o' his reach as possible."

"Ruby Ralph?"

"Yes."

"He told ther boys ther result of his trip ter Gold Eagle, an' about ther little fracas on ther north trail. I see you've got ther famous blade."

Old Wildfire drew the knife from his belt, and handed it to Desperate Dan for his inspection.

It was a beautiful weapon, and certainly justified the wildest reports concerning it.

The handle was of solid gold, and of exquisite workmanship, while the blade was of the finest-tempered steel.

Desperate Dan's eyes glistened as he turned it over in his hand and admired the graceful flourishes engraved on both sides.

"It's a reg'lar jewel!" he exclaimed, enthusiastically. "It's finer than it war ever pictured. I've often heard ov Foxfoot's treasure, but this ar' ther first time I ever set eyes on it. I don't blame men fer wantin' ter git possession ov sech a thing!"

"How did Ruby get possession ov it?"

"He went ter ther Eureka kentry an' got ther drop. He's been gone fer five days."

"He didn't harm Foxfoot?"

"No—sez he didn't, but turned 'im inter a reg'lar ragin' cyclone. He's somewhar in ther vicinity ov Bowie now."

Desperate Dan handed back the knife almost reluctantly.

Old Wildfire smiled proudly as he restored it to his belt.

"Thet knife belongs to ther Eureka kentry," he said. "Every ounce ov dust yielded by one vein is in the handle."

"I know; I've heard all that a score of times. Thar's goin' ter be trouble over ther thing yet. Ruby Ralph's wild over his loss."

"Loss? He stole ther knife!"

"He'll hev revenge just ther same!"

"Try it, you mean," was the response, with

fierce emphasis. "He's back thar now, I expect, swarin' his black oaths ov revenge. They'll be choked down his lyin' throat if he runs ag'in' Wildfire ov Eureka!"

"He's got forty men-tigers at his back."

"Yes, ov course he means bizness. Thet's ther reason Rosa an' I have decided to rent a private cabin for the night. We'll keep out ov his road ez much ez possible. I know the reputation ov the Panther's Paw; we'll not go thar, an' I wanted to ask you fer the use ov your cal-in, Desperate Dan. What do you say?"

Dan hesitated only for a moment.

"Yer welcome to it," he replied. "I'll run ther risk ov ther boys chawin' me up fer doin' it. But if thar's any trouble 'twixt you an' Ruby, don't look ter me fer help. While I'm yer friend, an' 'll not raise a weapon ag'in' yer, I'm not quite ready ter turn up my toes by goin' back on Ruby an' his gang. Yer done me a big favor once, Wildfire; I'll not fergit it. Come on."

As he finished speaking he led the way straight on, away from the Panther's Paw, and toward the outskirts of the camp.

Without another word Old Wildfire and Rosa followed him, and a few moments later the three stopped before a neat-looking little cabin, whose door Desperate Dan threw open.

"It's yours fer ez long ez you want it," he said, as Wildfire swung himself from his saddle and proceeded to help his daughter to dismount. "It's not a palace, Rosa"—smilingly; "but, ef I do say it, ez clean ez any ov its neighbors, tho' thar's not many ov them close by."

"We're deeply indebted to you for your kindness," Rosa said, gratefully, and a moment after all three entered the door, Dan being in the rear.

There was only one room, but the rough furniture, though spare, was neatly arranged, and everything, as the owner had alleged, was orderly and clean.

If Old Wildfire had first inspected every cabin in Bowie Point and then taken his choice, he would undoubtedly have chosen the one he was now in.

For, be it said to Desperate Dan's credit, he was not naturally as rough and idle as most of his neighbors and associates, and he took pleasure in keeping his little home in tidy order.

Two large bear-skins were spread over the floor, and just opposite the door was a fireplace over which hung several culinary articles.

In one corner was a clean little couch, and just above it a neat row of shelves, upon which lay several weapons and some articles of dress.

Besides these the room contained an odd-fashioned chair, a torch lamp and a rude, but serviceable table.

Things were much better than either Rosa or her father had expected, and, after noting for a moment after their entrance the features of the room, they turned to their friend to tell him so.

Desperate Dan, however, had not waited to hear an opinion expressed of his domicile, but silently and unobserved had stepped out the door and back toward Pepper Pete's bar, leaving them to arrange themselves as comfortably as possible alone.

We will do the same, kind reader, and precede Desperate Dan to Pepper Pete's.

The roughs by this time had given up all hopes of catching another glimpse of the celebrated beauty of the Rockies for the time at least, and all retired to the hospitable bar, where they proceeded to "pizen" themselves in doses large and too numerous to mention.

The health "ov ther first an' l thet ever struck ther camp," was drank simultaneously by every citizen present, Ruby Ralph proposing the toast and downing his liquor with an extravagant flourish.

It seemed that Old Wildfire had not angered him much after all by avoiding the Panther's Paw and patronizing another establishment for the night.

He cast a piercing glance over the crowd as he set his glass down on the bar with a heavy thump.

"Thar's only thirty men hyer," he declared; "where are ther twenty missin' ones?"

Pepper Pete volunteered information.

"Countin' out Desperate Dan, Flash-Eye an' Catamount Sam, they're all down in ther Last Ounce mine. Do you want 'em?"

"Not afore dark. Fierce Frank can tell 'em then what I'm goin' ter mention ter you all now."

The giant speaker leaned his bronze hand on the bar and looked at his rough listeners.

"Spit 'er out, cap'n!" exclaimed one, as Ruby Ralph hesitated. "Le's hear yer idee."

Bowie Point's king-pin smiled.

"All right, Buzzard Ben," he replied. "Yes, it's an idee, gerloots—a most ge-lorious opin-yun! Ther two richest treasures in Arizona are now ter be found in this howlin' little burg, an' what says yer, can't we keep 'em both hyer? Thar's but one man ter oppose ther fifty scalp-lifters ov this buzzin' precinct, an' it's now in our power ter make ther camp famous. Feller-cits, don't yer see ther needle-p'int? When dark comes, nothin' 'd be easier 'n waltzin' down ther trail thar, an' possessin' ourselves ov ther boss prize boxes ov ther Rockies—the gal an' ther ten-inch treasure. What do yer say, gents?"

"But thar's Old Wildfire. He's worse'n dynamite when touched off."

"One ag'in' fifty—ther hare an the lion."

"Yer perpose ter drop 'im?"

"Yes—ter avenge ther theft ov ther gold bowie! I could 'ave covered 'im a few minutes ago, but it didn't suit me ter; I preferred ter wait an' rake in ther whole pot."

It was evident that Ruby Ralph was confident of the success of his plan if attempted, being in the best of spirits.

As he finished speaking a figure darkened the door, and all recognized Desperate Dan.

He stopped on the threshold and held his hand up to warn silence, while he bent forward in a listening attitude.

"Thar's a boss comin'," he told the roughs at the bar as he straightened up.

"From where?" inquired Ruby Ralph.

"Ther east, at a gallop."

A moment or two later every one in the room heard the rapid clatter of horse's hoofs on the rock-bedded trail.

Nearer and more distinct became the hoof-beats of the animal ridden by the man from the east, until, as Ruby Ralph strode to the door, the rider drew rein in the middle of the trail forty feet away.

"Masked, by Jehosaphat!" Ruby exclaimed.

Sure enough the man's swarthy features were almost entirely concealed by a black mask, but his figure, it was seen, was broad and robust.

As the horse halted the darkly bronzed hand of the stranger went up with something bright in its clasp; the next instant a twelve-inch bowie was buried deeply in one of the logs at the right of the Panther Paw's door, two feet from the spot where Ruby Ralph and Desperate Dan stood.

Then without a word the masked rider wheeled his horse and galloped rapidly back the trail he had just come, unheeding the ringing command to halt that overtook him from Pepper Pete's threshold.

"Go on then, durn ye!" Ruby Ralph exclaimed. "We'll see what thet bowie means."

He stepped out the door and the crowd followed.

"A notice, by Jehosaphat!" he ejaculated, and then the toughs at his back held their breath while he read to them from the rough piece of paper pinned by the stranger's bowie to the hotel door.

"NOTICE."

"Warnin' is hereby given ther galoots ov Bowie Point that uness Ruby Ralph returns ther gold bowie to Foxfoot, the owner, in two da.s from date, the Eureka Kentry will take up ther fight an' w ip the western gophers out ov ther dens! Gold Eagle haz been insulted by a mean coward an' coyote, an' she means bizness!"

"GOLD EAGLE CITY."

The first to break the silence that followed the reading of this direct threat was Ruby Ralph himself and he broke it with a mad oath.

"A coward an' coyote, eh?" he grated. "Thar'll be some blood-lettin' fer thet! I'd like ter know who's insulted now—Gold Eagle er Bowie Point! Give up ther gold bowie?—never! Let the Eureka galoots come. Fifty wildcats with twice ez many men-killers in their hands will be ready ter receive 'em! Gold Eagle hez owned ther gal an' ther gold bowie long enough, an' now Bowie Point's got them in her possession an' she's goin' ter keep 'em. It's war ter ther knife, Gold Eagle City!"

His last sentence proved terribly true in the end.

CHAPTER V.

RUBY RALPH AND OLD WILDFIRE SHOOT.

THE very plainly worded notice from Gold Eagle took the Bowie Pointers somewhat by surprise. They had expected some trouble from the captain's visit, but it was about to assume a form totally unlooked for.

Ruby Ralph had committed a deed which, unless righted at once, would subject the entire camp to the vengeance of their indignant eastern neighbors.

But it was immediately apparent that all sided with Ruby Ralph, and that the ownership of the ten-inch treasure would be disputed to the last.

When Fierce Frank told Foxfoot that every man in Bowie Point would fight for that knife he did not miss it far. Perhaps it dawned upon some that a mistake had been made in the manner the blade was secured, but a question of right and wrong never entered their minds.

The gold bowie was a very desirable piece of property, and they considered the securing of it a most remarkable feat. It was a thing of beauty and usefulness combined, and to those rough men something calculated to make any camp famous.

True, they could not say they had it really in their possession; but it was right in town, under their very noses, and with but one man to contest their right of ownership.

But Gold Eagle's notice was not the only surprise Bowie Point had that day.

Shortly before dark two men rode into the camp who looked like they had just come out of a battle.

Their clothes and faces were bloody, and one, who was darker than the other, was supported in his saddle by his companion.

They came from the east, and rode slowly over the trail, for it seemed their wounds were painful.

When they drew rein in front of the Panther's Paw a crowd rapidly collected around them, for it took but a short time for the citizens to recognize the new arrivals.

Ruby Ralph and Fierce Frank had retired to the bar-room and they were quickly summoned out.

As his eyes fell on the men on the horses the "captain" uttered a tarted exclamation.

"Jehu! Catamount Sam an' Flash-Eye!"

"Thet's what, cap'n," the big herder responded with a mad oath, "er worse, we're what's left ov ther two just mentioned. We struck a masked cyclone just this side ov Danger Valley."

"Tell us about it, Catamount."

"We want some whisk first—ther Injun an' me. He got a worse dose 'n I did. See, he's about gone from so much blood loss, an' I'm weak an' sick. Bring us some drinks, Buzzard Ben."

In two minutes the one addressed returned with two brimming glasses of the fiery stuff, which the wounded herders succeeded in soon putting out of sight.

Then they were assisted from the backs of their horses and found comfortable seats in the bar-room.

"Twar a reg'lar cyclone, es I said afore," Catamount Sam explained to his listening pards, "an' it war all over in a minit. He had on a black mask an' was follerin' ther east trail. Flash-Eye used his lasso, but he missed his distance, then, great Scott! he turned on ther Injun like a flash! Then there war two shots at once; I shot at the masked devil an' he shot at ther Injun. They both reeled in their saddles but ther stranger war game, an' he up an' give me a shot afore I could wink, an' it sent me down. When I got up only ther Injun war in sight, an' we come on ter Bowie after somethin' ter brace us up."

It was clear enough to the roughs who the man was who had defeated Catamount Sam and his pard.

"That cussed rider from Gold Eagle!" Ruby Ralph gritted. "By thunder! I long fer ther time when Bowie an' Gold Eagle meet; thar'll be some blood spilled in ther way ov vengeance!"

"Mebbe they can all fight like this one."

"No—what if they can? You an' ther Injun bungled ther job."

"Not much, Ruby," was the quick reply. "But he's ther second one thet hez turned his weapon ag'in' Flash-Eye an' me ter-day."

"Who war the other one?"

"Foxfoot, an' he war fully as bad as ther masked devil. We lassoed 'im and disarmed 'im, but forgot ter search his saddle-pockets."

"He didn't shoot, though?"

"No, but we showed 'im our backs until out ov range. He wants his gold bowie."

"I know all that, Catamount," was the response with flashing eyes. "When are you an' ther Injun goin' back ter ther ranch?" Ruby Ralph continued. "Thar must be somebody thar."

"Ez soon ez we liquor up, eh, Flash-Eye? an' git this blood washed off, cuss ther devil thet spilled it! You'll not go back ter ther ranch ter-night, Ruby?"

"No; I've got bizness hyer."

An instant later the king pin of the moun-

tain camp was making his way toward the door, and soon his stalwart figure passed out into the open air and away from his pards.

He could not forbear a glance at the paper which still fluttered from the bowie at the right of the door, and his brow darkened.

"I may hev ter send an answer ter that yet," he muttered, as he turned to the right and walked down the trail. "Mebbe they won't come, and I'll send 'em somethin' thet'll stir 'em up—set their blood a-b'ilin'! It'll hasten 'em over ter meet ther deadliest men-killers in ther Rockies!"

He laughed fearlessly as he made his way along quite rapidly toward the southern limits of the town.

"My cabin is one ov ther few in range ov Dan's," he continued, halting at last before a rude shanty and glancing across the twenty yards of space that intervened between Desperate Dan's cabin and his own. "Gosh! I wish dark 'd come! I'm anxious ter clap my hands on ther daisiest flower and ther prettiest weapon in ther gold region!"

Dark was coming, the stars were beginning to show their faces in the sky, and the air was moist with dew.

Ruby Ralph paused but a moment before his door, and enteri g, closed it behind him.

A moment after he heard a step outside and a loud rap that caused him to turn, with revolver in hand.

As he cautiously opened the door, a familiar name fell from his lips.

"Desperate Dan!"

"Yes, cap'n," was the reply of the man who stood five feet from the threshold, and who in his next remark came right down to his business: "I've come ter ask a few questions concerning Bowie's visitors."

"Well, shoot ahead."

"Ov course, yer know thet Old Wildfire an' his kaliker pard are housed over thar in my shanty?"

"Yes."

"Ye'r not kickin' because I done it?"

"No. Ez well thar ez at ther Panther's Paw."

"Mebbe yer don't intend ter disturb them ter-night?" Dan said, after a moment's silence.

"Don't? Well, I'm goin' ter possess myself ov ther two richest treasures ov ther Rockies—ther Mountain Rose an' ther golden bowie—ter-night!"

Desperate Dan had not been present when Ruby Ralph discussed his plans that day, and he looked blank for a moment at these bold words.

Finally he said, with outward coolness:

"Rob ther nest, eh?"

"Yes."

"An' Wildfire?"

"Is ter be paid back fer his work on ther north trail ter-day."

The giant in the doorway spoke the words sternly and in a manner that left his hearer in no doubt of his intentions.

"See hyer, Ruby," Dan said, after a moment's silence, and his tones were threatening. "Ye'r welcome ter ther knife, but leave ther gal—ther Mountain Rose—alone!"

Almost before the words were out Desperate Dan realized that he had been too hasty. He had spoken his thoughts almost unconsciously, and they were not in the least calculated to carry his point.

He saw Ruby Ralph regard him a minute with anger-kindling eyes.

"Leave ther gal alone—at your command! By Jehosaphat! you're gettin' entirely too fresh, Desperate Dan! Cuss yer pictur'! how dare yer dictate ter me?"

Desperate Dan saw that he had placed himself in a bad situation. But he determined to face it out.

"Easy, Ruby; I meant it fer yer own good, an' fer ther good ov ther camp. Don't yer s'pose ther Eureka kentry would avenge ther theft of its purty citizen, an' ther death ov one ov its leadin' spirits, let alone ther gold bowie? Don't yer think so, Ruby?"

"Yes—no! By thunder, Dan! I believe ye've fallen in love with ther Eureka Rose yerself!"

The captain saw the start the other gave, and immediately took it for an evidence of guilt.

"By the fiends! I don't allow thet!" he hissed, his eyes blazing with rage, and his revolver coming to a level with his face. "Blast ye, it seals yer doom! Makin' love without my consent, eh, an' dictatin' ter me what I must do with my own private property? She's mine, Desperate Dan, an' its death ter make love ter her without my consent! By heavens! Hyer ends your love-makin'! Not a word, Desperate Dan! My finger 'n ther trigger!"

Was the heartless demon of the gold camp, in his maddening jealousy, going to shoot his pard down before he could utter a single word in defense of himself?

"Hold hard thar, Ruby Ralph!" suddenly rung across the trail. "Shoot him an' I shoot you!"

Desperate Dan sent a lightning glance toward the speaker. Old Wildfire, who had suddenly thrown open his cabin door, and now stood on the threshold with leveled weapon.

Ruby Ralph heard the words, but the Eureka man's warning came too late, his "finger was on the trigger."

All at once a ringing shot awoke the mountain echoes, and Desperate Dan threw up his hands with a wild cry, and fell to the ground!

But the following second there was another report from a certain doorway twenty yards away, and Ruby Ralph staggered back into the darkened interior of his cabin!

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE TOILS.

"DEAD, sure enough," said Old Wildfire three minutes later, as he bent over the outstretched form of Desperate Dan, in front of Ruby Ralph's door. "I was a minit too late, an' thet mountain demon got in his work. Satan! Thar should be retribution, swift an' terrible, fer this. I hope my shot laid out his slayer! I'll go in an' see."

Two steps took him to the door, which he entered fearlessly.

He found it too dark inside to see objects distinctly, and fumbling in his pockets for a moment, he had the satisfaction of producing a match. He struck it upon the wall, and almost the first thing he saw, as the blaze flared up, was a tallow candle upon a rough table at one side of the room. He lighted it, and then turned his gaze to the objects about him.

He did not see at first the prostrate figure in the furthest corner of the cabin, but when he did a moment later he sprung to its side.

"Not dead, ov course!" he ejaculated, with his hand on Ruby Ralph's beating heart. "Ther ball has hit a rib an' glanced out. He's bound ter come around all right."

At that instant a shadow fell across the floor and some one entered the door.

Old Wildfire wheeled, and he could hardly forbear a start.

He was faced by the frowning muzzle of a six-shooter!

"I'm Fierce Frank," said the man who extended the weapon and who had entered almost noiselessly. "By blazes! I hev a notion ter shoot yer in yer tracks! Throw up yer hands afore I do!"

A second's silence followed the roughs words. "What is it ter be, Wildfire?—hand's up, er death?" he continued. "I seen ther whole performance 'twixt you an' ther cap'n, an' I've got vengeance hyer in my hand. Up they go, er I pull trigger!"

The bronze hands of the old man went up but his eyes snapped angrily.

Fierce Frank laughed maliciously.

"Ov course it makes yer mad," said he. "But, thunder! you'll hev ter stand worse things than that afore ye'r' through with this. You're a fool ter use ther cap'n thet way in Bowie Point; yer might know some pard's revolver 'd overtake yer."

Old Wildfire, still holding his hands above his head, looked straight into Fierce Frank's triumphant visage with eyes that did not quail.

"I say," the desperado suddenly went on, "we're goin' ter ther pards at Pepper Pete's now! I'll send some ov ther boys back arter ther cap'n. Go ahead—yer know ther way, an' remember, thar's big chances ov my shootin' when ther gold bowie an' ther Mountain Rose are at stake!"

Without a word, Wildfire stepped out of the door into the starlight, and Fierce Frank followed at his heels with menacing revolver.

"Jehu!" the rough could not help saying to himself as his captive walked silently before him up the trail. "It'll be ther easiest thing in ther world ter carry out ther cap'n's plans now. Ther gal's whar she can be found at any minit, an' I saw ther gold bowie in Wildfire's belt back thar."

His eyes for a moment glittered like twin stars as he thought of the two prizes Bowie Point coveted, and which were now within reach in the confines of the camp.

Wildfire went straight on, with his back to the man who had implied that he would shoot him at the slightest move to escape. What else could he do, at the very mouth of a deadly revolver?

"Walk right in," Fierce Frank said, a few minutes later, as Old Wildfire halted just at the edge of the lamp-light that streamed out of the open door of Pepper Pete's liquor paradise. "Ther pards ov Camp Bowie 'll be glad ter see yer—every one. In we go, Wildfire."

Nearly fifty red-shirted roughs congregated in the saloon looked surprised when two men, one covered by the revolver of the other, marched in through the doorway and paused before the bar, in plain view of all.

"Thar ne is, boys!" Fierce Frank exclaimed to his pards, pointing the fore-finger of his left hand at his prisoner, "ther boss treasure-owner ov ther Eureka kentry. Cover 'im, wildcats; he's just finished layin' ther cap'n out!"

At this last intelligence a score of weapons were jerked from as many buckskin belts, and the ominous clicks of the locks could be heard in every part of the room.

"Drop yer hands now," said the fierce man, and Wildfire leaned complacently against the bar and faced the men who were eager to avenge. "This is the man who stole ther gold bowie from Ruby Ralph on ther north trail ter-day," he continued, addressing the roughs who flanked him, "an' who has figgered in an affray with ther cap'n ter-night. Yer kin see part ov ther ten inch treasure in his belt thar now."

How the eyes of the Bowie Pointers sparkled when they saw!

"Nod yer head, Fierce Frank, an' we'll avenge all thet," was the response.

"No; we'll save 'im fer Ruby Ralph. Ten ov you boys go down ter ther cap'n's cabin an' bring 'im hyer. Ef he ain't dead he's got ter be 'tended ter, an' if he is, we'll sw'ar ther biggest oath ever taken in Arizone. Buzzard Ben kin choose 'em ov ther cherubs."

A few seconds later ten of Ruby Ralph's stanchest backers went down the rocky trail side by side, and their walk soon brought them to the cabin in question.

They did not pause before the door but advanced with expectant eyes.

Every brow grew black as they entered and saw the owner of the shanty outstretched in a dark pool of blood on the floor in one corner of the room.

"Thar's likely ter be blood-lettin' on ther other side fer this!" Buzzard Ben grated as he bent over his captain and pard. "Hyar, men, gather 'im u; we'll carry him up ter ther Panther's Paw, an' try an' nurse 'im back ter life. Easy thar, now."

Carefully the rough hands lifted the body and bore it from the cabin, and on, under the light of the stars, until the hotel bar-room was reached.

"Thar's Ruby," said Buzzard Ben to the crowd, as the inanimate form was laid gently on one of the card-tables. "He's a fit subject ter sw'ar vengeance over."

"We'll do thet same, pard, ef he don't take vengeance in his own hand," was the reply, and mad glances were cast in the direction of the cool prisoner.

The men did not hesitate, but set to work at once and did all in their power to bring the captain back to consciousness.

His wound was washed and bandaged and his tawny brow bathed.

Somewhere in the gold mountains some one had heard that whisky was good in a case of this kind, and they forced the handy remedy down his throat untiringly.

At last their labors were rewarded. Ruby Ralph opened his eyes.

He seemed to take in the situation at a glance as his strength returned.

He arose from the table and managed to make his way over to the bar, where another drink was taken, which seemed to brace him up and fire his nerves.

There was a glare of vengeful fury in his eyes as he set down his glass and turned to the man who was still covered by a dozen revolvers.

"You kin rob Ruby Ralph on ther trail, an' shoot 'im down in his own door, but it don't win ther game!" were the first mad words that fell from his tongue. "By Jerusalem! those two acts'll cost ye yer life, Wildfire! You've come ter Bowie an' played a game thet'll make this place yer buryin'-ground. I hold ther winnin' hand; I always win when I play—always! What chance hev you an' ther Eureka Rose got when you've spilt ther best blood in ther camp?"

Instead of turning pale when his daughter was mentioned, as the speaker anticipated, Wildfire leaned forward with fearless mien.

"Kill me, an' take her," he said, with clinched teeth, "an' Eureka, not me, will avenge yer devilish work!"

The fierce words almost staggered the wounded bully, and he made no reply for a moment.

"We've heard ov sech things afore," he articulated at last, with some of his former savageness regained; "but ther fifty men-panthers ov Bowie's Point ar' never scared by threats! We've selected this mountain Eden ter be ther future owner ov knife an' rose, an' nothin' but eternal 'nihilation kin wipe out ther plan! If Gold Eagle comes she'll meet men who never crossed hands with mercy, an' who don't mince matters with six-shooters!"

"She'll ask fer no mercy," was the prompt response. "'War to the death' is her motto."

"An' ours, with ther gold bowie an' Mountain Rose at stake. Thar! I saw a flash at yer belt, Wildfire: I want ther ten-inch treasure!"

Ruby Ralph took a forward step, and the next instant his fingers closed over the protruding handle, and the beautiful blade was drawn forth.

The roughs, as if expecting the prisoner to resist this act, drew back the hammers of their weapons threateningly, but Wildfire made no move.

He stood calm and erect and with firm-set lips, resentment and defiance shooting from his eyes in answer to the looks of commingled intimidation and triumph bestowed upon him.

The captain held up the glistening knife for a moment before the admiring glances of the crowd, the lamp-light streaming with dazzling brightness upon handle and blade.

"Bowie Point's property, an' a daisy!" he exclaimed, exultingly, and with glittering orbs. "If Foxfoot er Gold Eagle gits it now they've got ter fight fer it! Jeho-saphat! how it shines!"

Finally he shoved it into his belt and turned toward the door.

"Keep yer eyes an' yer weapons on thet devil," he said to Fierce Frank and his wild pards, meaning Wildfire. "I've got bizness elsewhar fer a few minutes."

He waited for no reply, but left the bar and went to the door, and stepped out into the shadows.

"Now fer ther rose blossom ov ther gold hills!" came eagerly from his coarse throat, as he glanced back to see if he was followed and then turned his steps toward the south. "Ther game hev played right inter my hands, an' now I'm goin' fer ther last stake, ther fairest flower that ever bloomed in ther mounts ov Arizone!"

He seemed to have forgotten his wound, and to fail to note that he reeled like a drunken man in his walk.

Nothing but the one object now filled his mind, and to this object he made his way as fast as his weakened condition would allow.

"I'm hyer!" he suddenly exclaimed, a short time later. "For'ard inter ther dove's nest!"

The door of the shanty before him was not locked, and it yielded to the pressure of his arm.

In he strode to the middle of the floor, and then looked around him.

Somebody must have been there before him. A lamp was burning upon the table, but Rosa, the mountain girl, was gone!

A mad oath from the six-footer announced this fact.

CHAPTER VII.

FOXFOOT ENTERS!

"AFORE us lies ther six mile ov trail we've got ter travel, so hyer we go, Flash-Eye, full ter ther brim an' with extra bottles in our pockets! Thet devil from Gold Eagle at least give us an excuse ter come ter Pepper Pete's an' sling rat p'izen, an' now I feel about ez good ez new, eh, pard?"

Catamount Sam and his red pard, Flash-Eye, were riding from Bowie Point in much better spirits than when they entered the place an hour before.

Their wounds, though deep, had not proved serious, and under the bracing influence of the vile liquor they had found at the Panther's Paw, and which ran down their hardened throats like water, they were, as Sam said, almost as good as new.

The last cabin in the eastern extremity of the town had just been passed, when the big herder made his remarks.

"Whisky heap good!" Flash-Eye replied, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Pep' Pete keep fine stuff—nice drink! Flash-Eye weak an' sick from wound, drink whisky, git strong again. Throw lasso now, sure!"

He held up the rope that dangled from his saddle and looked at Catamount Sam confidently.

"Ye'r not likely ter hev a chance ter try ter-

night, Injun," the latter smiled. "By George! ye'd better be sure next time. Yer might not git off so well ez you did ter-day. I've nearly lost faith in yer boasted skill."

"No, no, that once in long time," was the Indian's quick response. "Flash-Eye miss no more. Ah! my saddle-girt loose."

They drew their horses to a halt and the red herder dismounted and rearranged the strap. All at once he bent his ear to the ground.

"Horse comin'!" he exclaimed, a second later, as he straightened up and remounted his animal. "Comin' fast, not far off."

"Then back inter ther bushes," said Catamount Sam, and both riders drew their steeds back into the shadows at the right of the trail. "It's lucky yer stopped, Flash-Eye. Mebbe it's an enemy."

Shortly after, both men heard distinctly the sound of iron-shod hoofs as they beat upon the hard trail, but a short distance ahead.

"Thunder, Flash Eye!" Catamount Sam exclaimed, "I'm not so sure ez I was a moment ago that yer won't hev use fer yer lasso ter-night. What if it's ther mask from Eagle City? If it's him, he's comin' on ter a deadly surprise—a picnic we'll not charge him a cent for!"

Eagerly the men waited in the shadows by the Arizonian trail, bending forward on their horses and straining their eyes to catch a glimpse of the approaching rider.

On he came at a lively pace through the starlight, and at last the forms of horseman and horse came into view.

Wildcat Sam could not identify the person for some time, but all at once he turned to his red pard with a meaning face.

"It's ther boy—Foxfoot ov Eureka," he whispered, excitedly. "He's comin' ter Bowie in search ov his knife. Put up yer lasso, Injun, we've tried thet on him once. I'll see what vartue thar is in ther kind ov a weapon he used on us ter-day!"

"The shooter?" Flash-Eye queried.

"Yes!" was the mad response. "When ther young devil drove us down ther mountain ter-day he drew an' cocked my weapon ag'in'im fer all time. He's a fool fer comin' ter Bowie Point. Thar's death hyer!"

Again the two waited in silence.

The young Knife-Hunter was on the alert, but he did not suspicion the two foes who watched his approach from the shadows by the trail.

Not until he was fairly into the trap did he realize his danger.

Catamount Sam suddenly straightened in his saddle and extended his arm. In his hand was clasped a ready-cocked revolver and his finger was at the trigger.

"Halt thar, baby!" he sung out, sternly. "Hands above board, fer we've got ther drop, hev we—Flash-Eye an' Catamount Samuel!"

The powerful black horse the boy bestrode was reined in not over ten feet away, just as the two ambushers spurred out into the open trail.

"No use kickin', Foxfoot, we've got yer!" Catamount Sam went on with a coarse, triumphant laugh. "We didn't use ther lasso this time, my apple blossom, an' this shooter is a durned sight deadlier. Up with yer hands er they remain down ferever!"

"Just as you say, Catamount," was the easy answer, as he went the youth's hands. "I was riding into Bowie Point—isn't that Bowie Point yonder?"

"Yes."

"Well, I came in on a little business of importance, but if you an' yer Injun pard there want to entertain me, banquet me, tender me a royal welcome, or anything of that kind for a few minutes, why, I guess I can spare the time."

Catamount Sam burst into a derisive laugh.

"Nary a festival ner picnic ter-night, unless yer call this, er ther neck-tie party about ter come off in Bowie Point, one," he replied, as, at the side of Flash-Eye, he faced the young trailer, with weapon leveled steadily.

"What neck-tie party?" Foxfoot inquired.

"Wal, yer see," Sam smiled, "Old Wildfire hez cost Ruby Ralph some trouble, so ther boys roped ther Eureka cyclone in, an' they do say ther cap'n's goin' ter hev a lynchin'-bee ter-night."

The rough watched the effect of his words keenly, and he saw the youth start; but no reply was made, so he continued:

"Goin' ter Bowie on bizness, eh?"

"Yes."

"Who do yer want to see thar?"

Foxfoot hesitated only a moment.

"Since you've made it yer business to inquire into details, I will state that I want to see the boss man-eater of the camp."

"Ruby Ralph?"

"Yes."

"Ye'r huntin' yer gold bowie?"

"You bet I am! Do you think I would give up the hunt?"

"Ye'r a fool fer comin' ter Bowie Point fer satisfaction, is ther noblest truth I kin orate ter yer at present. Do yer know, thar's liable ter be two neck-tie picnics in ther place afore mornin'. Ruby Ralph may want ter see you!"

"Then it will be a mutual pleasure!" was the cool response. "If you fellers have no objections now, I'll lower my hands an' move on. My business is pressin'."

Catamount Sam again laughed, while his stoical pard retained silence.

"Ov course not," he said, sarcastically. "But—ez me an' Flash-Eye war travelin' thet way, we'll jest go 'long—behind yer, an' yer'll please keep yer paws up! See? Move aside, Injun, an' go ahead, Foxfoot, an' don't fer an instant forget thet I hold ther drop!"

With apparent indifference the Knife-Hunter urged his horse on past his captors, and they followed close behind him, as he kept on toward the camp they had not been traveling to.

Little Foxfoot thought a great deal in the following few minutes. He knew that once surrounded by Ruby Ralph's tough gang his life would be in the most imminent peril. Although he had never done Bowie Point any injury, he was aware that he had enemies there, chief among whom was Ruby Ralph, who exercised a powerful influence over his minions, and who might take it into his head that the young trailer had trailed his gold bowie long enough, and forever remove him from his path. But how to free himself from the deadly revolver that was thus forcing him into the new dangers was a question he had no means of deciding.

He hardly knew whether or not to believe Catamount Sam's story concerning Old Wildfire. But the intelligence troubled him. The Eureka "cyclone" had been his most trusted friend ever since his advent into that country, a year and a half before. He knew that Wildfire had gone to meet his daughter at Nugget City, and that this was the night they were to have spent in Bowie on their way home to Gold Eagle. And if Wildfire was in the toils, where was the lovely Rosa whom he had never seen, but of whom he had often heard so much?

"By Jericho! there's something goin' to break pretty suddenly!" he grated under his breath. "Cuss those devils behind there! I've got to get rid of them in some way!"

"Flash-Eye," he heard Catamount Sam say all at once to his Indian pard, "thar's no need ov yer ridin' on inter Bowie Point; I kin manage this young Gold Eagle flower. Turn back an' make fer ther ranch. Ther cap'n said somebody hed ter stay thar, an' I'm likely ter be engaged fer some time. What do yer say?"

"All right," was the laconic reply that came to the boy's ears, as Flash-Eye turned his horse and rode back toward the east.

"That don't better my condition," growled Foxfoot to himself.

Then he sent a quick glance over his shoulder, in hopes of catching Catamount Sam off his guard. But no, that same glistening tube was still turned his way, and he could see that the herder was closely watching him.

It was but a short distance from the spot where the pards ambushed their youthful foe, to the rough collection of catins that arose dark and seemingly still under the stars of the southwest sky. The horses walked fast, and they were soon entering the camp, and bearing directly for the Panther's Paw, the place of all others, Foxfoot had been told, where, night or day, Ruby Ralph's men could be found.

Catamount Sam had relapsed into silence, but his revolver was held cocked and ready before him upon the saddle-horn, and his eye never wandered from the figure upon the horse in his front. The boy, tired of holding his hands straight up, had locked them and rested them upon his head, guiding his well-trained horse with a word. Thus they rode—nearer and nearer toward the center of the camp—toward Ruby Ralph and the roughs who would kill for the gold bowie.

Shortly they could see the bright lamplight that emanated from a certain doorway not far ahead, and Catamount Sam knew, if the boy did not, that that was their objective point—Pepper Pete's.

But nearly as the desperado had succeeded in his work, he was destined to be thwarted yet ere he reached the aimed-for goal.

Foxfoot had been constantly alert for a chance

to turn the tables, but his captor's guard had never flagged for an instant, determined as he was to not be caught napping a second time.

Finally the trailer had resigned himself to luck, and luck proved to turn in his favor.

Suddenly from the shadow of one of the numerous shanties that lined the trail a light figure stepped forth and barred the path of the two riders.

Both halted their horses before the command that was uttered the next minute reached their ears.

"Stop, you two, and drop that revolver, behind there!"

The looks of astonishment on the faces of the two "held up" men could not have been seen in the dark, but they were there all the same.

It was not so dark but what they could see that the figure before them was that of a beautifully formed girl, in a dress of some light material and with hair uncovered and unconfined.

Didn't they guess who she was?

At the first glance.

What other such creature could there be in that country save Rosa, the pride of the Arizona gold hills?

There was a threat implied in her musical but ringing tones, and she extended a revolver that pointed directly at Catamount Sam!

As soon as the two had stopped she stepped to the right and forward, thus bringing the herder into position.

"Drop your weapon," she repeated, the click of her own supplementing her words. "You're carrying this thing a little too far, whatever your name is. Ruby Ralph's roughs have already got one prisoner yonder, and they shall not have another, if I can prevent it."

Catamount Sam relaxed his vigilance for a moment over his prisoner and leaned forward in his saddle.

"What if I don't drop it?" he asked, as if to test her. "You wouldn't shoot?"

"Don't try me," she warned, sternly. "If you don't obey me I will surely shoot—not to kill, but to disable; I don't want your life-blood on my hands."

With a muttered exclamation the rough shoved his six-shooter into his belt, and at the same instant he saw that he was covered by another weapon.

Little Foxfoot had taken advantage of the moment that he was unwatched!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE EUREKA ROSE.

TEN minutes later the boy halted before the girl again.

"I sent him down the east trail without a weapon," he told her, referring to Catamount Sam. "The treacherous bound would have come back the minute my back was turned if I had left him his arms. Was he mad? Well, yes, but it did him no good. Thanks to you, I am well rid of him now."

"No thanks," the Eureka Rose smiled. "Aren't you Wildfire's friend—the owner of the gold bowie?"

"Yes, and you are his daughter, of whom I have heard so often?"

"I suppose. We have never met before?"

"No; you have been away, it seems, ever since I have been your father's friend."

"I have been in the East since my mother's death, two years ago. Wildfire told you of me?"

"Of course. He thinks you some beautiful angel without wings, and, by Jove! he don't miss it much!"

There was true admiration in the boy's tones, as he noted the finely-molded figure and the strikingly beautiful face, which contrasted so strangely with their rough surroundings.

He had halted within a few feet of the girl, and was leaning forward as he addressed her.

She averted her eyes for a moment before his admiring gaze, and then looked up into his face with a smile.

"There!" she said, "we'll talk about something else. You haven't told me how you came to be entering Bowie Point covered by a revolver. For all I know you have committed some crime, and was being marched to a just fate."

"Hardly that," he laughed, softly. "Catamount Sam might have told you that story, but I tell it differently. To begin with, I went to Danger Valley this afternoon after a certain gold-handled knife I have lost, and this Wildcat Samuel and an Indian brother of his, Flash-Eye, laid in waiting for me and made me a prisoner with a lasso. I succeeded in turning the tables, however, by the use of a revolver at the right moment, and went on my way rejoicing. As the owner of Danger Valley, Ruby Ralph, the

man I want to see, did not come home, I got tired of waiting, and came on to Bowie Point. A mile from town the two again ambushed me, with what success you know, the Indian returning to the valley after my capture. But you told Catamount Sam that they had a prisoner here, where?"

"At the Panther's Paw."

"Who?"

"Your friend and my—"

"Not Wildfire?" the trailer exclaimed.

"Yes," Rosa answered, in a troubled voice; "the desperadoes of the camp have him surrounded yonder where the light streams out across the trail."

Foxfoot was taken aback at this intelligence.

"What has he done to make them his foes?" he asked, as he looked down into the anxious face upturned to his.

"First, he made Ruby Ralph give up your gold bowie, which he saw in his belt; then he wounded him because he shot Desperate Dan, the only friend we had in the town. I stole up to the hotel door awhile ago, but some one came out and I ran here to avoid discovery. It was Ruby Ralph, I think. He went off toward the cabin Wildfire and I occupied, to find me, perhaps. If so, he did not find me in, and it was well, maybe, for I would have shot him, rather than have gone with him!"

There was silence for a moment after she ceased speaking.

Foxfoot was thinking rapidly, and there was a dark frown on his brow.

He remembered Catamount Sam's words regarding the fate Old Wildfire would probably meet at the hands of his captors, and then he thought of the fair, unprotected girl at his side, even then being hunted for evil purposes by the chief ruffian of the camp.

"She did more than she supposes," the youth said to himself, "when she rescued me from Catamount Sam's clutches. She brought to herself a friend and she certainly needs one now."

All at once he dismounted from his horse and stood facing the girl.

"Rosa," he said, quietly, "this place is full of danger, and I want to befriend and advise you."

Her looks gave consent, and he continued, speaking rapidly:

"You must get to some place until Old Wildfire is free to go on with you to Gold Eagle City. Where to go, however, I do not know, for this is my first visit to this vultures' nest, and I haven't a friend here to whom I could go for information. Wildfire is in peril, but might be saved by timely aid from a friend—from me, and I am ready to see what can be done. But first, where will you go?"

He hardly expected a reply, but she said:

"I can go back to the cabin. Ruby Ralph has been there once and he will hardly look there for me again; but if he does I will defend myself."

"And I will be near. Your plan is the only plan we can follow. I'll leave my horse here, and go with you."

He tied the animal securely in the shadows, and then the pair so strangely met quitted the spot side by side.

They left the trail to their right and made their way among the cabins, passing the Panther's Paw with but a glance in at the rough crowd that stood around the unseen prisoner.

"We must hurry—you may be needed there!" the girl exclaimed, quickening her pace.

"Heavens! if they should—"

She did not finish the sentence, and the young Knife-Hunter felt, rather than saw, the slight form quiver with apprehension.

The next minute he seized her, almost rudely, by the arm, and drew her back against the logs of a shanty they were passing near.

Some one, the figure of a man was approaching them.

He had just stepped from the door of a cabin half a hundred feet ahead, when the boy noted his presence and made the hasty move to avoid discovery.

The stars were shining brilliantly and the light dress worn by the girl would have betrayed them at once, but fortune had favored them. The leafy branches of a crooked old oak overhung the house and the spot wherein the two shrank, shutting out the starlight and making it too dark to discern objects with any distinctness even at a close scrutiny.

Foxfoot stood before his companion with revolver half-drawn, uncertain as to whether they had been discovered, and with eyes that watched every movement of the man, who seemed to be taking a course toward the Panther's Paw.

The trailer noticed that he wavered in his walk at times, as though he was weak or light-headed. He saw also that he was powerfully built and roughly dressed—then he recognized Ruby Ralph!

He half-raised his revolver as if to halt him in his tracks when this discovery was made, but he as quickly lowered it.

The captain of the roughs did not suspect the nearness of the boy whose knife he carried with uncouth pride in his belt, and the girl whom he had but that moment been hunting. He walked quickly up the trail with his blood-shot eyes fixed savagely and thoughtfully on the ground.

Foxfoot fancied the being who touched his shoulder held her breath while he passed by, and then gave something like a sigh of relief when he had gone.

"That was Ruby Ralph," said the trailer, vindictively. "He's returning empty-handed from his hunt. I thought I saw the glitter of my golden bowie in his belt, and I longed to force it from him at the weapon's mouth! My time will come ere long!"

They had taken a roundabout course to avoid a near approach to the Panther's Paw, and they now re-entered the trail which they had left at the start.

A few moments' walk brought them to the cabin they had seen Ruby Ralph leave, and pushing open the door, both stepped inside.

A pencil and some paper lay on the table beside the lamp that still burned.

"I have been wondering what Ruby Ralph was doing here so long," said Rosa, as she crossed the room to the table; "I've found out now. He's been writing on some of my paper that I left here; some of it is gone, and you can see the impression of his rough letters on the top sheet."

"I see no note he has left us," replied the boy, with a smile.

"No; he probably wasn't expecting you and I to come here, and in company."

"It was well for us that he left when he did, as we might have run in on him. I didn't want to meet him then, but I do now! You'll be brave, Rosa? Don't be afraid to shoot if necessary. I'll be back to report soon, and bring your father if there's a chance."

One look into her firm-set face was answer enough, and without another word he reopened the door and passed out.

Before going far he examined his weapons, to make sure they were ready for instant use; then he continued his way, stealing forward like some prowling wild beast, toward the cabin which emitted the bright lamp-light.

CHAPTER IX.

WINNING AND LOSING.

FOXFOOT advanced cautiously, for he had a feeling very far from desire to again fall into the hands of one of Ruby Ralph's men; he might not come off so well next time.

He paused when he reached a spot where he could look into the open door of Pepper Pete's notorious saloon, and leaning against the logs of a shanty which was situated just opposite the place, he surveyed the scene inside with interest.

"He's there, I can see him now," he muttered, "the only true friend I've had since coming to Arizona. He looks mild as a lamb, but wait till he gets riled—the Bowie Pointers'll find him a regular blizzard! There seems no outlet for him just at present; the room is full of red-shirted desperadoes, and each one seems to take a pride in displaying a weapon. There's Ruby Ralph."

His teeth snapped with hatred when his eyes fell upon the brawny thief.

"You could tell the big ruffian in any crowd—he's almost a head taller than his pards, except Catamount Sam. Once see him and you'll never forget him. It seems my acquaintance of this afternoon is going to make a speech from the position he's taken; he'll have one attentive listener, at least."

A small box had been placed in the center of the floor of the bar-room, and Fierce Frank had mounted it with the evident intention of placing himself in sight and hearing.

The boy listened eagerly to hear every word that might be said.

"Now go on with yer talk, Fierce Frank," came to his ears in a voice which he recognized as Ruby Ralph's.

Fierce Frank straightened up with an air of importance, and gazed around at the men who stood about him in listening attitudes.

"Feller-gerloots ov Bowie," he began, in his coarse tone, "we've got a prisoner hyer ter

dispose ov, an' ther question hez come up, what will we do with 'im? Yer all know what ther charges are ag'in' 'im—how he shot ther cap'n down in cold blood in his own cabin, an' how he laid in waitin' on ther north trail ter-day, an' made ther cap'n pass over, at ther weapon's mouth, ther gold bowie that it took five days ter get. Them are ther charges, now we've got ter decide his fate. Ez le is one ov ther Gold Eagle gophers, an' ez it's war ter ther knife 'twixt them an' us, ly vipin' 'im cut it'll only be openin' ther fight, an' ll make one n an less fer us ter face. Some ov us are bound ter fall when Bowie Point an' Gold Eagle meet, an' we kin begin ther work ov vengeance now—with him. On ther other hand, ef we turn 'im free, he'll begin his lead-singin', an' yu've all heard that he knows low ter do that."

Numerous opinions being advanced here by his audience, the speaker paused for a moment, as if their talk angered him.

"You fellers needn't be so darned swift about chippin' in yer ideas," he growled. "Noddy axed yer fer 'em, an' yer'll please bark ter me till I git through."

"Ruby Ralph an' me hev decided ter hev six men choosed ter settle on his fate, an' whatever they say will be ag'le to ther rest ov us. Buzzard Ben is ter choose five besides himself fer ther jury, an' retire ter ther next room till ther thing's decided. So go ahead, Fuzzard, an' do yer work in a hurry. We're not pertickler about ther result, jest so thar's some fun in it fer ther lads."

Fierce Frank winked slyly after his last remark, and allowed his mouth to lengthen into a broad grin, which did not in the least enhance his good looks. His meaning was probably understood by Buzzard Ben, who at once proceeded to select five of his bronzed pards for the jurors, and retire with them to an inner room.

"I believe I can guess what the verdict will be," said the boy sly, who watched the proceedings from the corner of a certain cabin on the opposite side of the trail. "They've all long since settled on a picnic smothering like Catamount Sam mentioned. What's ther use of carrying on this farce?"

Fierce Frank still remained standing on his happily improvised platform, facing the door, ready to announce the decision of the jury the moment they returned.

He did not have to wait long for their appearance. Five minutes after they left the room the partition door was reopened, and the six red-shirted judges, headed by Buzzard Ben, filed in.

Their verdict was communicated to Fierce Frank, who in turn repeated it to the eager crowd:

"Death by hangin' at sunrise!"

There was a subdued cheer, and all eyes turned to the prisoner. He still leaned against the bar, his manner cool and off-hand, and seemingly the least interested one in the room. Only the smoldering light in his eyes told the roughs how fearlessly and contemptuously he regarded them and the dire sentence of death they had just passed upon him.

"It's not necessary ter state that ther decision 'll be carried out ter ther letter," the fierce man added. "With ther Eureka Pose at stake we'll do nothin' by halves. Till mornin' ther prisoner 'll be kept in ther cap'n's calin—his town residence. Ruby lez instructed me ter nominate Fuzzard Ben ez ther cap'n ov ther guard, with ez many pards ter aid 'im ez he wants. How many will yer vant, Fuzzard?"

"Ter stay with 'im all night?"

"Yes, an' lird 'im land an' foot; ther law sez he mustn't escape."

"One er two should be enough; keep one another company, yer know."

"Wal; ther prisoner's turned over ter yer now. See ef yer turn 'im back in ther mornin'."

Old Wildfire was seized, and his weapons, which his captors had evidently not thought it essential to remove before, were now taken from his belt and given in charge of Pepper Pete, who found a refuge for them behind the bar.

"What if I should need them?" the Eureka man sent over his shoulder with an affected smile as his guards started him toward the door, and Pepper Pete and others in the saloon laughed aloud.

"You kin hev 'em when yer call fer 'em, in person," the whisky-dealer answered derisively.

The following moment Little Foxfoot saw his friend step out the door, guarded by three men who bore cocked revolvers in their hands.

He drew back close to the shanty until they had passed by down the trail, and then he crept noiselessly after them.

From hut to hut he glided, now walking erect and now sneaking forward like a stealthy assassin.

When he halted he was not far from the cabin before which he saw the men pause, securely bind their prisoner and then hustle him over the threshold into the dark apartment.

"Quick work, and doubtless good, but it's got to be undone," the boy murmured. "Soon as they get those cocked weapons put up, so that a fellow's got a chance to get the drop, their bread's goin' to be dough. I came here for a knife, but I don't shrink from a sport like this!"

Just then a figure came out of Ruby Ralph's "town residence" and moved by toward the Panther's Paw.

"Since they've got him helplessly bound, they've concluded *two* would be enough to watch," the spy smiled. "So much the better—I'll act now!"

Forward he crept once more with a ready six-shooter in each hand.

Boy though he was, he was about to undertake a desperate game, a game in which failure meant death, not only for himself, but for his Eureka friend likewise. But that the young Knife-Hunter, cool-headed and steady-nerved, was fully capable of executing his hazardous plan, was clearly proven by the result.

Buzzard Ben and his pard, after securing their captive in a manner which made escape unassisted impossible, left him to his reflections and went out of the cabin, to take up their positions as sentinels.

"Never mind closing the door, but take notice that I've got the drop!" came a commanding voice, and the two started back at sight of the boyish figure that extended two cocked and aimed revolvers ten feet away.

"Who says so?" Buzzard Ben growled, with a fierce oath.

"Foxfoot, Knife-Hunter from Gold Eagle!" was the prompt and steady reply over the leveled barrels. "Up with hands, both of you! You've had yer dirty farce for nothing, and you lied when you said Old Wildfire would hang at sunrise! He goes free this hour or there'll be two desperadoes less in Bowie when the sun shines! Hands up, I say! I'm here on business, and disobedience means death!"

Two pairs of hands went slowly up, as if their owners were calculating the chances of clutching a weapon.

"It seals yer doom ter do such work in Bowie's Point!" Buzzard Ben hissed. "Thar'll be two lynchin' bees in place ov one!"

"There's catching before hanging—always!" the boy retorted. "You two *march*, and remember, I'll let starlight through yer brains at the first break! Forward!"

Sullenly the two obeyed, without any idea of where they were going, and the Knife-Hunter followed with unlowered weapons.

He marched them straight up to the door of the cabin occupied by the Eureka Rose, and there they halted, for they could go no further.

"Now rap, Buzzard Ben, and then step aside a couple of paces," he commanded in a low tone.

The rough obeyed, and the following moment the door was opened, and the girl stood there with revolver in hand.

"Go and release yer father in Ruby Ralph's cabin," said the boy, without taking his eyes from his prisoners, and with a glad cry Rosa sped across the open to the shanty she knew to be the one mentioned.

As she darted in she heard her name called in a familiar voice at the further side of the room, and the next minute her quick fingers were setting her father free.

Soon the ropes fell from his limbs, and springing to his feet, he followed her as she led the way out.

He was still on the threshold, when some one with a stalwart figure sprang around the corner of the cabin, and dealt him a blow in the face with the butt of a revolver that sent him reeling backward to the floor!

The girl shrunk back against the cabin and attempted to raise her weapon, but it was struck from her hand, a strong arm was thrown around her and she was lifted off her feet and borne swiftly down the trail.

She would have screamed, but her face was pressed close to the shoulder of her captor and she could scarcely gain her breath.

And Foxfoot? He glanced up just in time to see Old Wildfire fall and the girl seized, and had his captives not been as much surprised as himself, they would have turned the tables then and there, for he was almost powerless to move for a moment.

Then like a flash his wits returned, and he realized the situation. But his hands were tied, so to speak. He dared not fire at the dark form of the abductor for fear of shooting his beautiful burden; and he knew that he would be pounced upon by the two guards the moment his weapons were turned. Thus he was as unable to save as if he were helplessly bound!

Man and girl had disappeared among the cabins when he spoke to the two "covered" roughs.

"Throw down yer droppers," he said in a steely voice, his very tone a threat. "Careful now, I'd as lieve shoot as not! There—face to the west! Shoulder to shoulder, march!"

Buzzard Ben gave vent to a big oath as he obeyed the boy, and strode away at his companion's side.

The Knife-Hunter followed, nor did he pause until fifty yards had been placed between him and Rosa's cabin.

"Keep right on—until you're out of range," he said to the two pards, and then, without waiting to see if his command was performed, he dodged behind a convenient shanty, and made tracks back to where Old Wildfire had fallen.

"To his aid first, then to the trail!" came between his teeth. "He went south—so do I!"

As he neared the cabin he saw a horse gallop away from the Panther's Paw toward the east, bearing a rider whom he did not recognize.

He gave the horseman no thought, but quickened his pace, and soon sprung into the room.

As he entered he could see no dark form on the floor, and after an unsuccessful search he struck a lucifer; its light only confirmed his suspicions—Wildfire was gone!

CHAPTER X.

GOLD EAGLE RECEIVES A NOTICE.

RUBY RALPH, the king-pin of Bowie Point, had written a return notice to Gold Eagle, which he calculated would "stir 'em up an' set their blood a-bilin'."

Not but that he had faith that the men of Gold Eagle would attempt to carry out the trust laid down in their message; but he wanted to fling to them his defiance, and let them know just what to expect from Bowie Point, should they pay it a visit.

Although Bowie's eastern neighbor outnumbered it three to one, Ruby Ralph had no notion of acceding to their demand, and restoring the costly knife to the boy owner.

The maxim that "all bullies are cowards," did not apply in his case; rough, reckless, a veritable desperado, carrying his life in his ready weapons, as it were, he did not know what fear or subjection meant. And backed by nearly fifty men of his own stamp, who would protect their camp and fight in its interest to the last breath, he dared defy the Gold Eagleites.

He had not been successful in finding the Mountain Rose in the cabin, much to his chagrin. But seeing the writing materials on the table where the fair girl had left them, he set to work and performed what was a very difficult task for him—writing the message.

This Pierce Frank was selected to deliver, as he was better acquainted with the country than most of his associates; he it was the young Knife-Hunter saw ride away, and whom in the darkness he did not recognize.

It was well along toward the middle of the night and the nearly full moon was just appearing above the horizon as the fierce man rode out of the town.

Ere learning how well he succeeded with his mission we will leave him to his ride and look in advance of him, perhaps thirty miles.

At about the same hour that he rode from the Panther's Paw, a man who wore a mask over his face was entering a picturesque little mining city situated in the heart of the fertile Eureka country of our story.

He was roughly dressed and mounted upon a fleet horse, whose sides were sprinkled with foam, as if he had traveled a long distance.

Rider and horse seemed to know the way perfectly as they advanced, and they were soon in the midst of the cabins.

Numerous lights were shining, which told that the citizens, owl-like, were still awake.

Finally the horseman dismounted before a house from which the lamplight issued unusually bright, and in which a number of men were engaged in drinking and talking.

While he was hitching his horse he could hear parts of their conversation, and "knife," "gold bowie," etc., were mentioned quite frequently.

As he strode in the door exclamations dropped from several tongues:

"Apache Steve!"

The new-comer leaned back against the bar of the saloon and laughed almost triumphantly. He removed his black mask before speaking, revealing a face dark and rugged.

The twenty men in the room crowded round with eager questions, and Apache Steve seemed willing to answer them.

"I planted ther notice where it'd do ther most good," he said, "in two feet ov ther king-pin ov sneaks himself?"

There was a cry of delight at these words.

"And he read it?"

"Ov course. I stuck it right at ther door ov ther Panther's Paw."

"Yer didn't see Foxfoot er Wildfire?"

"Nary—"

"Heavens, Steve! Yer side's livcred with blood!"

The messenger looked down at the dark stain on the right side of his shirt and his eyes blazed.

"Yes; it was two ter one."

Twenty brows grew black.

"Foul play, eh?" was the savage demand.

"It looked that way; Ruby Ralph tri-d ter halt me when I presented him with ther notice, but it wouldn't work. But five mile this side ov ther thief's den, an' Injun with a lasso an' a big tough with a shooter got in this job on my side. I hed ter shoot 'em both!"

"Throw 'em cold?"

"I can't say fer certain. I thought I was a goner myself fer a few secon's, an' got out o' thar ez fast ez I could stand it ter ride. I soon come ter a stream, an' I washed ther wound an' fixed it up ther best I could. But I'm all-fired weak. Give me some drink, bar-keep!"

The liquor cleared Apache Steve's throat and brightened his eyes.

"I tell ye, boys, thar's likely ter be war 'twixt Bowie Point an' Gold Eagle!" he declared. "I have an idea thet notice stirred 'em up like hornets. Ruby Ralph is ther p'izenest skunk in ther Rockies, an' would stoop ter do anything. You fellers know thet."

Yes, they knew. They remembered his visit to their camp two days before and his cowardly theft of Little Foxfoot's golden bowie. After such an act as that they believed him capable of any crime.

"Ter-night is ther night, yer know, thet Wild fire an' his lovely darter was ter stay in Bowie on their way here?" Steve went on. "What if Ruby took a notion ter ther Rose thet belongs ter this kentry?"

Nobody answered this question. It seemed to strike them dumb.

"Yer remember her, pards? Two year ago we used ter love ther spot her dark eyes rested on. Heavens! Ruby Ralph's dirty life wouldn't half pay ther debt he'd owe us if he took her; vengeance'd be slighted if every coyote in ther cowards' camp was killed!"

"He wouldn't dare, Steve!" suggested some one.

Apache Steve thought a minute.

"Maybe; yer can't tell. But if Wildfire an' her don't git hyer ter-morrow, we may know thar's trouble. What then, pards ov Gold Eagle?"

The answer was not hesitated on an instant.

"We go to Powie Point with men-killers in our paws. If thar's harm done, we shoot ter kill!"

"An' ther gold bowie?"

"Do yer think they'll return it ter Foxfoot, Steve?"

"I can't tell sure," was the doubtful reply.

"Ruby Ralph's gang an' at cut ez tough ez they make 'em; I don't think they'll return it."

"Then we kill two eagles with one rock! Ther two days we allowed 'em may not be up, but we'll fulfill our threat just ther same. Thet knife's got ter be returned at all hazards!"

There was no hidden meaning concealed in these words; the men of Gold Eagle City were in deadly earnest.

But there was only a limited number present to announce their approval of what was being said, and Apache Steve remarked this fact.

"Ther boys war all hyer an hour ago," was the reply, "but they give yer out, Steve, an' went home."

Although Gold Eagle, as before said, was at least three times as large as Bowie Point, it was much more quiet and orderly and there was none of the disturbing element there which characterized its western neighbor.

The men were mostly honesty-loving miners, who toiled through the day and slept at night, but who, if their rights were encroached upon, as in the present case, were quite ready to lay

down pick and shovel and take up knife and revolver for a deadly settlement.

But the Eureka country was not wholly a mining district; there were beautiful valleys of long and luxuriant grass which pastured vast herds of branded animals, and especially in the southern part were the ranches numerous and well-stocked.

Here was where Little Foxfoot and Old Wildfire owned lovely homes, almost in sight of each other, and which lay in one of the richest regions in Arizona.

In Gold Eagle the two friends were well and favorably known, as the possessors of the famous treasures which were the pride of the Eureka country.

Gold Eagle had yet a further blessing of which it could boast; Rosa of the south was not the only female inhabitant; there were several of the fair sex in or near the city, and this fact more than any other, perhaps, led the citizens to conduct themselves quietly and orderly.

But when Foxfoot told Catamount Sam that the whole Eureka country was aroused over the theft of the gold bowie he had made no mistake; it was even so.

When the report had been spread of how the big Bowie Pointer had got the advantage of the boy and forced away the knife, work was abandoned and knots of mad-looking men could be seen everywhere in Gold Eagle discussing the outrage. Soon they sprung into action, and the entire region was ransacked for the thief. But after a day's unsuccessful search they desisted, and Little Foxfoot struck out alone on the trail of his gold treasure, with the assurance that unless he found it in two days, he would be assisted by men who would find the knife, and pay the thieves dearly for its keeping!

Words to the same effect were sent to Bowie Point by Apache Steve, and by midnight he was back.

An answer was not expected, yet when morning dawned a paper was found pinned to the saloon door, which when read made a hundred swarthy brows grow black and as many pairs of dark eyes flash.

Apache Steve was not among the earliest arrivals on the scene, probably owing to the fatigue occasioned by his long ride of the day before, but when he did appear he was led straightway up to the notice, which was fastened with the same significant ornament that he himself had used to hang up his warning the evening before in Bowie Point.

This is what he saw written in rough characters on the white sheet:

"NOTICE!

"Bowie Point hez both knife an' rose, an' we give up nothin'! We invite the coyotes ov Gold Eagle ter come an' see us. Don't shoot off yer lip so much, but come! Only fools threaten, men act! We'll treat yer ter ther biggest cold lead picnic yer ever drea-ded ov, an' pr ve that yer lied like Pinta squaws when yer said thar was a co'ard belongin' ter our camp!"

RUBY RALPH."

Apache Steve whirled on his heel and faced the angry crowd.

"Thet settles it!" he hissed. "We take ther trail ter ther west at once, with drappers ready ter carry out our threat! Only fools threaten, eh? We war fools awhile back, but we're men now, an' we'll act! By Judas! we'll attend thet pistol picnic, an' we'll avenge ther cowardly insults long afore ther moon throws a ray ter-night! They've got both ov ther Eureka prizes, pards ov Gold Eagle, an' thet means somethin' more terrible fer Bowie than a threat! Come—sixty ov you fellers thet are not afraid ter chaw lead; we'll not lose a minute. My blood biles fer vengeance!"

Is it not needless to add that they obeyed him?

CHAPTER XI.

CATAMOUNT SAM AHEAD.

JUST as the moon came up, a youth well-mounted, rode out of Bowie Point toward the south.

He urged on his horse rapidly, and his eyes were bent on the trail before him.

"We're on the right trail. Star-face," the rider spoke to his animal. "I heard the clatter of hoofs down this way three minutes after the abduction. And don't I know who it is that's ridin' ahead of us with a girl in his clasp? Didn't I know the figure that ran down the street and disappeared in the dark? Catamount Sam! The devil I sent toward Danger Valley without a weapon two hours ago. He came back in spite of my command to keep his distance. He's played a big game, but there's nothing but defeat for him at the end of it!"

On over the rough trail bore the swift-footed horse and Bowie Point was left far in the rear.

"The girl first, the knife afterward," the young trailer resumed in determined tones. "Wildfire has lost his grip, or something, and this trail is left for me. I'll not turn back until it's brought to a successful end—I swear that! Catamount Sam's ahead just now, but he'd 'a' better taken my advice and went on to the ranch where he belongs with his Indian pard; he'll lose more than a pair of six-shooters and a knife this trip!"

And far ahead, far south of the Eureka Knife-Hunter, Catamount Sam, victorious and defiant, plied the spurs mercilessly to his horse and was carried at a dangerous rate over the mountainous road, with his beautiful captive held before him in the saddle.

Yes, the big herder had played a big game, and won; it remained to be seen whether or not his success played him true to the end.

He had gone back to Bowie Point after his banishment by the youth with no definite intent, except to try to again get his young foe at his dropper's muzzle and finish the work he had begun. He had witnessed a scene in which a splendid chance had been offered him to take a hand, and he had accepted; lo! the result; the fair flower of the Arizona hills was in his possession, and he was placing miles between them and her friends.

The girl did not struggle; she knew it would be utterly useless.

She was forced to lean back on the broad breast of her captor and listen to his triumphant speeches and almost feel his burning eyes upon her.

"Oh, ye'r' prettier than ther wildest dreams hev fancied yer!" he broke out as the gray horse under them dashed on. "Ye'r' worth ther biggest bonanza in ther gold hills any day! Ruby Ralph wants yer, my blossom, an' we're goin' ter whar he'll find yer now; yer'll belong ter him—ter Bowie Point hyerafter, Rose; no more Eureka, no more Wildfire er Foxfoot. It's good-by ter all!"

She could not repress a shudder of aversion, and she closed her eyes as if to shut out the dread thoughts.

"It was a neat trick yer played on me ter-night fer ther Gold Eagle trailer," the desperado continued. "Thet was ther first time I ever saw yer, an' it was yer face more'n ther pistol in yer hand thet got ther drop. Ther boy sent me off ter ther east without knife er shooter, but great Tophet! I went back. It don't matter if I shifted round ter ther south an' entered ther saints' camp from thet direction, er if I had ter go through some galoot's cabin ter re-arm myself; I went back, an' hyer I am with a brace ov men-killers in my belt an' ther mountain rosebud in my arms! Ther flag ov victory's perched on my brow, an' ther band's a-playin' 'whoop-whoop-ra!'"

Catamount Sam seemed on the point of throwing up his sombrero and shouting aloud his triumph; but he did not.

He said no more for a time, contenting himself with his thoughts and with pressing his long-winded steed to greater exertions.

After a long while, during which their speed had not been perceptibly slackened, they came to a spot where the trail branched off to the east.

The herder allowed the animal to decrease his gait somewhat here.

"To ther east an' then ter ther north!" he exclaimed: "whar then, my daisy? Danger Valley ranch! Thet's my plan, yer see. If thar's foes on our track they'll never think ov turnin' off hyer; they'll suppose thet ez we started south we kept on south. Foes!—who knew thet we left Bowie Point in this direction? I dar' say Wildfire an' Foxfoot hev no idee whar we are!"

Ah, Catamount Sam, there is a foe on your track whom you will not throw by your craftful trick. Something of which you do not know will send him on the right trail and the prize will be wrested from your grasp, though you will not live to see it.

On—on went the gray horse, with his head turned now to the east.

The rocks and trees, grotesque and specter-like in the moonlight, were passed for miles ere a halt was made. Ten minutes' rest for the animal, then forward again he went seemingly as tireless as ever.

The route which Catamount Sam had chosen must have been a very circuitous one, for hours elapsed before they found themselves descending into the valley which the girl knew must be the one mentioned as their destination.

During all the long ride Rosa had borne up

bravely, hoping for the best; he had even performed an action which the big herder never saw or suspected, and which, if he knew of it would cause him to curse roundly.

As their horse had left the south trail and turned east she had managed to let fall her handkerchief for a guiding mark for Wildfire or Foxfoot if either was on their track!

And Catamount Sam, sublimely unconscious of the tell-tale piece of linen he was leaving behind him, felt sure that his little ruse would not be detected by any possible pursuers—that they would not entertain for a moment the thought that he had taken this long, round-about way to reach Ruby Ralph's home when there had been a very much shorter one open to him at the start.

Danger Valley, sure enough, was before them, in all its quiet beauty.

Sam spoke to his horse once more, and five minutes later he leaped from the animal with an exclamation of triumph in front of the cabin door.

"We're hyer, my future Bowie Point Rose," he said, as he caught her arms and lifted her from the saddle. "Come! This is whar Ruby lives, except when le's in Fowie, an' he'll be home ter see yer afore long."

He seized her wrist and advanced to the door. It opened before him.

"Ha, Flash-Eye! Them black eyes ov yern are al'ays open!" he cried, as the form of his red pard appeared before him. "Stand aside! I've got a treasure equal ter ther gold bowie hyer. We'll lock 'er up till ther cap'n comes."

She made no resistance as they led her into the moonlit room, but if they had looked closely they would have seen "defiance" as plain as words in her eyes.

Only a few moments had passed when the two herders came out and closed the door behind them.

"She's ez safe ez a bar kin make 'er," said Catamount Sam, in a satisfied tone. "I want yer ter keep 'er so, Flash-Eye."

"Watch close!" was the ready answer.

"Yes, an' at ther same time watch ther trail thar ter ther south. Thar *may* be some enemies come up thet way, an' it's best ter hev yer lasso ready. I brought ther gal from Bowie by thet route; it was a long ride, but I got thar!"

"You goin' back to Bowie row?"

"Yes, but by a shorter trail; I want ter see Ruby Ralph."

The moon's rays were beginning to pale, which denoted that morning was not far off, as the giant herder threw himself once more into the saddle.

He rode away, leaving the Indian standing before the cabin. But he had not gone far when all at once he halted and turned in his seat.

"Come hyer, Injun," he said, and Flash-Eye followed until he stood by his side.

He bent forward and gazed into the face of the red-skin with eyes that glared like coals.

"We've got a prize thar thet ther cap'n wants," he said, with a meaning glance toward the building they had just left. "At ther same time he's got a piece ov property that we want; do yer know what it is pard?"

"The gold knife!" Flash-Eye exclaimed.

"Thar! Yer hit it square! You an' me want thet prize, Injun. We'll trade 'im one prize fer another!"

The red herder comprehended his meaning, and his expression told that the idea pleased him.

"I've thought ov thet all alcrp," Sam continued, "an' I'm goin' ter fetch 'im ter them terms, which are nothin' but fair. I took big risks ter git ther gal, hev'n' ter snatch 'er right outer ther hands of Wildfire an' Foxfoot. Now I'll trade 'im ther Mountain Rose fer ther ten-inch treasure, which'll pay us fer our risk an' trouble. Good-mornin', Flash-Eye—hyer I go! Yer'll not lose ther dove in ther cage thar while I'm gone?"

"No!" said the Indian firmly, and again he was left standing alone in the moonlight, while Catamount Sam spurred away to the west.

If Flash-Eye had said 'yes' to his pard's last question he would have come nearer the truth!

CHAPTER XII.

THE MAD GIRL-HUNTER.

It is useless to say that there was no lynching in Bowie Point when the sun rose.

Buzzard Ben and his pard had made known the facts of the prisoner's rescue, and so when the orb of day ascended the heavens there were few astir, and those few as usual at Pepper Pete's.

Ruby Ralph was among the number, and in a

very bad humor, as was evinced by the frown on his ugly face.

He seemed restless, drank several times, and finally left the saloon and sought his cabin to the south.

"Thar's a certain piece ov calikered property goin' ter feel my hands afore midnight!" he said as he reached the door and flung it open. "I was baffled last night, but bet yer nuggets I'll come out ahead in the end! Ther game played right inter my hands but thet cussed boy broke my grip! But I got ther gold bowie, now I want ter know whar ther gal is. Whar is she? Who was it snatched'er from ther door hyer an' ran down ther trail with'er in his arms! I'll bet Foxfoot or Old Wildfire knows. I'll bet a hoss they've found ther Rose afore this."

"I'll take thet bet, Ruby Ralph, h!"

The captain of the roughs recoiled a step as a man advanced from behind the door he had just entered and paused but a few paces from him.

"I'll bet you a hoss Old Wildfire han't found the Mountain Rose!" the man went on. "I wouldn't be huntin' fer her now if I had."

"Huntin' fer her—in my cabin, eh?" Ruby Ralph exclaimed. "Didn't yer know she warn't hyer? You was ther last one thet occupied this room."

"It's been hours since I was hyer," the Eureka treasure-owner replied. "I've gone through every other cabin in Bowie Point, an' I thought she might be hyer."

"But I know nothin' about ther gal; I hev'n't seen'er."

There was that in the captain's tone which told his hearer that he spoke with truth, and which seemed to allay certain suspicions that the girl-hunter had cherished.

"If not you, who was it that knocked me back onto the floor hyer, makin' me see more stars fer about five minutes than I could count in ther sky in five hours—who was it snatched the Rose outer my hands? I hedn't time ter see, only that he was a giant, about your size, Ruby."

"Not me, Wildfire!"

"Then it could be but one other—the only other man of your size in this kentry."

A light broke over the features of the desperado, but he asked:

"Who is that?"

"Catamount Sam, I heard him called last night."

"Why didn't yer follow'im?"

"Follow'im!" Wildfire exclaimed, "I couldn't move fer five minutes, an' I had no idea which way he went. You've not seen ther big devil?"

"No."

"Then he's left ther camp. Five minutes after I staggered from the cabin last night I heard a horse go to the south at a gallop. It might've been him, though I didn't think so at the time."

The girl-hunter was lost in thought for a minute.

"In Catamount Sam's possession—that means yours!" he said, suddenly. "As you came to the door I heard you say you was bound ter hev her. I see by your face that you think you've got'er."

"What of I hev?" Ruby Ralph ejaculated, accompanying his words with a triumphant look. "Ov course, ef Sam's got'er that means Bowie Point. We're all pards ov ther fust water hyer."

"You'll fail ter keep'er ez you failed ter hev a lynchin' in Bowie when the sun rose!"

The giant rough's teeth snapped.

"Thar may be a lynchin' yet!" he ground out. "By Jehosaphat! yer not out ov ther toils by a long shot! I've got two men-killers hyer in my belt, an' I see none in yours!"

"I've got one just the same!" was the quick return, as a small but deadly weapon was brought into view. "I stumbled over this last night five minutes after I was knocked down. It belongs to ther Mountain Rose, but that don't hinder me from gettin' ther drop an' spilin' your little game! I've been in your clutches fer the last time—thar'll be no lynchin' in Bowie Point this day! I live ter hunt and find the Eureka Rose!"

Rapidly and with sharp distinctness Old Wildfire uttered his words while his eyes blazed with an angry light.

Ruby Ralph, with his hand on the handle of his revolver, where it had dropped when he thought to cover his supposed unarmed foe, was compelled to look down the bright pistol-barrel which the mad girl-hunter aimed between his eyes.

"Yer'll never find'er, I'll tell yer now, if Catamount Sam's got'er," he said, with a poor show of calmness. "He's a catamount—a whole

dozen—when tackled. Besides, he's backed by every man in Bowie."

"I'll find'er if she's on top o' ground in Arizona, an' backed by every man in the Territory!" was the fierce reply. "She's dearer to me than the air I breathe, and death is ther penalty ov the man thet defiles her with his touch! But, enough! I strike ther trail ov Catamount Sam hyer, an' woe ter him if I lay hands on his ruffian throat!"

The mad girl trailer backed toward the door and paused on the threshold.

"Don't put a foot in the sunshine under ten minutes," he warned the rough giant who watched his retreat with unconcealed wrath. "You do so at yer peril, don't fergit that. I commence right hyer to make this trail one of either success or blood. I'll depend a good deal on you which it'll be, an' you know what ther penalty is."

These were his last words and the following instant the doorway was vacant.

He had soon placed several cabins between him and the one he had just left, but he did not slacken his pace for some minutes.

He was thoroughly aroused; he was now in truth the Eureka Cyclone. The events of the past few hours had deeply stirred the vengeful blood in his veins and set his brain on fire, as it were.

Suddenly he halted in his tracks and ground his teeth together.

"Caesar!" he ejaculated, "I forgot thet—ther gold bowie! It was in his belt, now I remember. Back I go fer the treasure."

He turned, and three minutes later sprang into Ruby Ralph's shanty, revolver in hand.

"Gone!" escaped his lips; "back to his pards at Pepper Pete's, I suppose. I've let Foxfoot's prize slip through my fingers by a mean piece ov thoughtlessness. What of he'd let my prize get away like that? Caesar! I'd feel like dissolvin' friendship! Mebbe I can overtake ther big thief."

Back into the sunlight sprang the Eureka man, and quick walking took him almost to the door of the Panther's Paw without overtaking Ruby Ralph.

He had once more turned toward the south when he caught sight of a horseman entering the camp from the east.

He stopped to gaze a moment, and a look of recognition swept over his features.

"The trail ends almost at the place and time it begins," he uttered. "Thet's Infernal Sam yonder; I want to close a mortgage on some property you hev, my mountain giant!" and he dodged among the cabins toward the advancing horseman, and halted at the west end of a deserted shanty, a pistol-shot from the Panther's Paw. There he waited like a concealed tiger for the man approaching from the east.

He had not long to wait; all at once the head and neck of the horse became visible, and the girl-hunter leaped forward and grasped the bridle-bit.

"Not so fast, Catamount; biz'ness afore drinks always," Old Wildfire sent up to the big desperado as the horse was jerked to a halt.

Catamount Sam seemed not a bit surprised at being so unexpectedly interrupted in his progress. He leaned forward complacently.

"What biz'ness, Wildfire ov Eureka?" he queried. "My biz'ness hyer's with Ruby Ralph, at ther P. P. lay-out. I hev none thet I know ov afore reachin' thar."

"You've biz'ness with me, right hyer," was the response. "Ruby Ralph'll hev ter be put off. Thet's secondary biz'ness. Whar's the Mountain Rose?"

In furious and staggering tones the question was propounded, and this time Catamount Sam showed his surprise. For a moment his eyes failed to meet the sternly-accusing ones bent upon him; only for a moment. Then with nerves steady once more he gazed down into the mad face upturned to his.

"Ther Mountain Rose?" he repeated. "Thunder! how do I know? Ye've barked up ther wrong cottonwood, Wildfire. I know nothin' about'er. She war hyer in Bowie ther last time I war hyer. Yer hev'n't lost'er?"

"Yes—ter find again! You know nothin' about'er, Catamount Sam?"

"No—"

"Thar! no denyin', no lyin', I won't hev it! It's the truth er death at this stage ov ther game!"

There was terrible menace in words and look. The giant herder was at a loss what to say for a moment.

Suddenly he ground out an oath.

"See hyer, what does this mean?" he demanded. "Do yer accuse me ov stealin' ther Eureka Rose?"

"Yes, an' ye'r' now afore the court: I'm witness an' judge. Whar is ther gal, I say?"

"I don't know, an' ther court lies like a Piute—"

"Thar!" was the interruption, as the Eureka man's revolver hand went up with his weapon in its clasp. "I said it was ther truth er death on this occasion! Fer the last time, which is yer choice? Yer biz'ness with Ruby Ralph may hev ter be put off forever!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A GRIP AND A BULLET.

Not for a moment could the meaning of Old Wildfire's words be mistaken, and Catamount Sam had heard enough of the Eureka Cyclone to know that he never wasted words.

But the big herder was not yet ready to give up the secret of his captive's whereabouts. He realized that his life hung at that instant on the touch of a trigger, and it rendered him desperate. Not until the actual crisis came would he yield to save his life, and in the meantime he hoped at an opportune moment to secure the upper hand and escape with both life and secret.

He did not hesitate long with his reply.

"Ef yer please, I'll take no choice, my Satan's own," he said with apparent coolness in the face of the weapon down which he looked.

"I'll ft Bowie last night when ther stars begun ter appear an' nobody was with me but ther injun par," Flash-Eye."

"Then you c me back," was the ready reply. "Maybe you think I didn't know you when you sprung around ther cabin an' made this lump hyer on my head? Wal, I didn't. But I saw it was one ov the two giants ov this district, who I've heard reach the same light. It wasn't Ruby Ralph, for he was huntin' ther gal a few minutes ago. Now don't I know it was you, Wildcat Sam?"

Flash-Eye's big pard laughed.

"Ther witness in this court's swearin' ter big uncertainties. Yer eyes deceived yer Wildfire. Besides thar's more'n two men in Arizona thet go over six feet."

"Thar's not more'n two hyer, an' my eyes never lie!" Old Wildfire flashed. "This is a case whar thar's no mistake. The witness swars ter the truth and the judge has pronounced sentence—ther secret er death, you kin hev yer choice."

Catamount Sam made no answer.

Suddenly he revolver into which he looked was lowered and a hand closed like a vise over his arm.

"I see yer not disposed ter speak," continued Wildfire. "I'll see to thet. You speak yer secret er I make my throat good—but n't hyer! I hed almost forgot this was Bowie Point. I hear men down thar. Turn yer hoss, Catamount. We seek the mountains to finish this game!"

At the last sentence the desperado felt the body of the Eureka girl-hunter land behind him on the horse. He also felt the pressure of a revolver barrel at the back of his head, and with an oath he wheeled his animal and lent him the spur.

"We'll hev no interferin' from the pards ov Bowie," he heard from behind as the horse sped over the trail toward the ranch where the beautiful Rose of the Rockies was hidden. "You an' me pla this game with the winnin' cards in my hand. You'll find bet I take no lies Sam; you'd better make yer mind ter save yer brains, an' tell me whar I kin find the Rose blossom, er guide me to her. Yer know-nothin' racket won't work with the court. Yu've found tha' out already. Her dead mother would rise in her grave an' rebuke me ef I let'er fall a victim to Ruby Ralph's ruffians, ov which you're a good sample. This is a game ov death. Catamount, an' ther cards on the board are built ter. We've both played the game afore, an' I hed winnin' hands. You know ez well ez I know that a half a dozen words'er cheaper'n a bullet in the brain!"

Still there was no answer from the "covered" herder, and for a time he heard no more.

He used his spurs as if eager to reach a spot whar ther "biz'ness" could be settled without fear of interruption, and Ruby Ralph and his pards were left far in the rear.

If the Eureka Cyclone could have seen the look that had taken possession of his prisoner's eyes he would have read aright that the demon in the desperado's nature had been aroused and that some desperate work was in contemplation.

But the look was not seen, for the rough did not turn his face for inspection.

One mile—two miles had been passed when at last he drew rein at the side of the mountain trail.

The demon was plainer than ever in his eyes and his ample chest heaved with subdued fury.

No sooner had the horse halted than with a spring Old Wildfire landed on the ground with the revolver of the Eureka treasure still in hand.

The second he alighted he glanced up and saw the expression of the herder's face and he raised his weapon instantly.

But he was too late.

Like a flash the huge hand of the giant desperado descended and fell on the neck and collar of the man who had come there to gain a secret or to kill.

The next instant Old Wildfire was snatched from the ground with the strength of one powerful arm and thrown half-across the horse's neck, and the following second the animal shot forward like an arrow sprung from a bow.

On sped the horse down the rock-walled trail with a demon on his back and a man who had a terrible grip at his throat clinging to his mane. On for a mile was the wild run continued until the animal

was jerked on his haunches and brought to a standstill as suddenly as he had been started.

Then was the hand at the Eureka Cyclone's trachea removed, and he was shoved backward to the ground, the weapon which he had clung to during the ride falling at his feet.

Never in his life had Wildfire received such a choking. The fingers had sunk into his flesh like talons, and there was a black mist before his eyes for several minutes.

He staggered back against a convenient bowlder, and when at last he recovered from the effects of that fearful grip, Catamount Sam's victorious visage was almost above him.

"Ruby Ralph's pard some times turns on his foes," were the first words he heard. "You want a secret an' I want a knife, that's the only difference 'twixt us. I want ter bowie point fer her knife, an' you come hyer fer ther secret. Trumps are not bullets, but ther grip ov a mou tain bull! Who said fruit?"

The desperado burst into a laugh that fairly maddened the man that heard him.

Before the echo of his outburst had died away, he leaned forward, with the demon back in his eyes.

Again that rough hand came down, and this time clutched the choked man's shoulder.

"A grip hez won ther game," he exclaimed. "Yer played a good hand and—lost! Go back ter Gold Eagle! Ther two treasures are beyond yer reach, an' ther's nothin' but failure ter r suit from figh in' Ruby Ralph's pards. Failure?—it's worse'n that, it's death!"

Old Wildfire's look spoke defiance before his lips moved.

"Go back?—never, till ther Mountain Rose goes with me!"

"Then yer'll never go back. Yer kin hev yer choice, ez yer said ter me 'while ago; go back to-day without ther Rose, or stay hyer forever! Yer've got ter do one. Which'll it be?"

With his man pinned against the rock, and to ally unarmed, Catamount Sam evidently thought that he had him at his disposal.

But that was a day of changes.

The choking the big rough had administered had not in the least crushed the girl-hunter's purpose, or deprived him of his strength. He was on a hunt that demanded no defeat—a hunt that he had sworn never to turn from until successful; he could not afford to quit off at the very start.

His reply to Sam's words came in a manner totally unexpected by that worthy.

Sam was leaning forward, with his right hand gripping his prisoner's left shoulder, and his jacket thrown back, revealed a pair of huge six-shooters in his belt.

Like the dart of a serpent Old Wildfire's right arm shot out, and a second later his fingers closed over a protruding handle. Before the herder could realize and prevent the quick action, the weapon was in his foe's possession, and the barrel was staring him in the face!

With an amazed oath the desperado straightened in his saddle.

"Great Tophet!" he ejaculated. Then the wits that had forsaken him for a moment seemed to return.

Down came his heavy right once more, intending to seize the upturned weapon; but the descending arm struck only air.

The revolver had been jerked quickly back and then shoved forward again with a vigor that was not to be misunderstood.

"Bullets are trumps this inning, Catamount," came over the barrel. "This trail's liable ter be one of blood, ez I remarked once af re. Go back to Eureka at your bidding an' without Rosa? Never! I'll find'er whether you tell me yer secret or not. You've got'er, you've defiled'er with yer touch, an' that means death. You refuse ter tell me whar she's at, an' that's death ag'in. Besides, don't I still feel those claws ov yours on my throat? Gr at Tartarus! what a grip you hev! You play your game with a grip; I play mine with a bullet!"

The last words had hardly escaped from the mad speaker's mouth when Catamount Sam jerked the remaining revolver from his belt and thrust it forward.

A flash and a sharp report followed, but not from the big herder's weapon.

The Eureka Cyclone had fired first, and the giant who sat five feet away threw up his arms and fell from his horse!

CHAPTER XIV.

WINNING AGAINST ODDS.

At the same time the incidents just narrated were occurring, an Indian lay outstretched by the side of a trail that ran south from Danger Valley.

He was a fine-looking specimen of Indian manhood as he reclined on the velvety carpet of grass and allowed his eyes to scan the trail that ran upward through the mountains.

He was average in size and strong looking, and was armed with a black coil of rope and a knife.

Two hundred yards from where he lay stood a rough looking cabin, and just beyond a corral which inclosed half a hundred head of stock.

The Indian appeared to be watching for some one, for, except a quick glance now and then at the cabin, he kept his eyes fixed on the mountain road.

"Flash-Eye see any Eureka Rose's trackers," the red-skin murmured. "The lasso never fail d but once—never again. Catamount said 'Watch, Flash-Eye,' an' Flash-Eye watch till Ruby an' him come back."

The Indian seemed born of patience, for he had been watching there since daylight, and he continu-

ed to watch for the best part of an hour after uttering the above words.

At the end of that time he started half erect.

"Flash-Eye hear!" he exclaimed. "Tracker comes at last. Lasso never miss this time!"

The faint sounds of hoofs had come to his ears on the morning breeze, and well did Catamount Sam's red pard know what they meant.

Like a snake he crawled into the shelter of some bushes near at hand, and there waited with a look that resembled the tiger's.

It was not long before his midnight eyes caught sight of the figure of a horseman outlined against a mass of rocks, and moving toward him.

From this point he kept his gaze on the approaching rider constantly as he descended the winding trail into the valley.

As he came on Flash Eye suddenly uttered an exclamation:

"The Knife-Hunter!"

It was an astonishing discovery to the Indian. Catamount Sam had not told him of the boy's escape the night before, and he supposed him a victim ere this of Ruby Ralph's wrath.

There was a look of eagerness displayed and a tightening of the grip on the black lasso at this disclosure.

Ten minutes more, and the trailer was quite near.

Apparently he was not on the lookout for enemies. His eyes rested on Ranchero Ralph's cabin ahead of him, and he did not scan the bushes as he rode along.

The horse he bestrode was possessed of superior qualities, and the trappings of his saddle were rich and beautiful.

The boy's embroidered jacket was thrown open, revealing his trusty companions, revolvers and—no knife. The broad sombrero was pushed back from his forehead, and the September wind toyed with the dark locks that clustered there.

Handsomeness, a model of suppleness and bravery, he looked the picture of dawning manhood.

Why did he not approach cautiously? He was riding, seemingly unconscious of the existence of danger, into the reach of one of the most deadly lassoes in Southern Arizona.

And the owner of that lasso? All at once he sprang erect, and the coil of rope cut a circle about his neck; then, like a lengthening serpent, it shot through the air, and—Flash Eye uttered a wild cry of amazement!

Scarcely had the noose left his fingers when, like a flash, the Knife-Hunter threw himself forward along the opposite side of the neck of his horse, which at the same instant sprang forward.

The rope that the Indian had sworn should never miss again barely touched the back of the animal that sped onward with only the boot and arm of his rider visible to the amazed red-skin.

It was all done in less time than it has taken you to read it, and horse and rider were a hundred yards away before Flash-Eye moved after his bootless throw.

He drew in his luckless cord completely baffled. He was full of rage and astonishment at the unexpected trick, which had been played with such ease and rapidity.

He had intended a surprise, but instead he had himself been surprised.

Down across the valley he saw his youthful foe reseat himself in his saddle and making for the ranch cabin.

He did not see the revolver in the youth's hand, but there was one there. Neither could he see the cautious looks that he cast about as he approached the rough shanty.

Little Foxfoot had tracked the girl thief to his den. That this was the place where he would find his beautiful friend he had for miles back felt sure. He could see through Catamount Sam's game in coming the long, roundabout way to Danger Valley with his prisoner, and a well-played game it was; but it had not foiled him.

He felt that success was in his grasp—that in the cabin before him he would find the object of his search.

With ready revolver he dismounted from his horse and threw open the door.

No outstretched weapon deterred his entrance and he bounded in.

The room was empty, save some rough articles of furniture, which were in order.

But there was another apartment; Little Foxfoot had visited the place once before and he knew the interior perfectly.

Almost in the furthest corner was a barred door and without hesitation it was thrown open.

The young trailer leaped forward as a delighted cry reached his ears.

"Foxfoot!"

"Rosa!" he exclaimed.

She came forward to meet him and he took her hand in his own.

"I have found you, and unharmed, thank Heaven!"

"Yes; and I am so glad you came!" she replied; "you followed me from Bowe Point?"

"Yes, with but one halt; I stopped to pick up a handkerchief back where the trail forks."

"Then my dropping it was not for nothing," she smiled.

"You dropped it? I thought so. It sent me on the right trail. No, yer droppin' it was not for nothin'! Whar's Catamount Sam?"

"He and the Indian shut me in here and left. Wil' fire is not with you?"

"No," he responded; "I left him in the wolves' camp from which you were snatched last night."

A look of fear swept over her face.

"Not in Ruby Ralph's hands?"

"I think not. One blow on the head would not disable him long, and he is probably searching for you at this moment."

"He will not find me," she smiled.

"Why not?"

"I am already found! You have preceded him."

"That's a fact, Rosa. I hope to have the pleasure of restoring you to his arms. Shall we go back to him?"

"To Ruby Ralph's stronghold?"

"To Bowe Point."

She hesitated.

"It's running back to the fire, but—"

"You will not need to remain long, only till Wildfire is found, and I will not leave your side. You cannot stay here, and a gold bowie draws me back there."

"Then I will go with you. Catamount Sam had his long rifle for nothing, and when he comes back he will find the bird flown. He has kept me a short but miserable while a prisoner."

"We are even now," Little Foxfoot said. "Your revolver took me out of his clutches last night, now I assist you from his cage."

"And I thank you from my heart for your timely coming. We will go now?"

"At once."

He led the way to the outer door and the youthful pair stepped outside by side.

"I don't see the red heathen with his infernal lasso," the boy mused as he glanced about. "But he's not one to see this kind of a game go on. He'll show up again before we're out of Danger Valley."

"I must get an animal from the corral yonder," he continued to the girl at his elbow. "Mount Starface and come with me."

He brought forward the handsome horse and assisted her to the saddle.

The next instant she uttered a warning cry, and as the Knife-Hunter wheeled he grabbed a weapon from his belt.

He was just in time to see a black noose shooting through the air directly at his head, and he threw up both arms to ward off the dreaded coil.

Almost unconsciously and without aim the revolver in his hand was fired, and following the shot he heard a yell of pain.

Indistinctly he saw the red lassoer fall backward with his hand at his side, and the lasso jerked a moment too soon, struck breast and arms and sent the boy reeling against the side of his horse.

Recovering, he sprang toward the Indian who had fallen at the corner of the cabin with the rope in his grasp.

"Heavens! the luckiest shot I ever made!" he exclaimed. "It saved me from the red choker's clutches, which means much, and made one bad man less in Arizona."

Flash-Eye did not move as the young trailer bent over him, but he gave the boy a tigerish look.

"I understand—this wasn't in the programme," Foxfoot smiled. "You've got yer death wound, Injun—yer passport to Tartarus. You and yer evilish pard there, ther lasso, have played one trick too many."

There was no reply except a compression of lips and another mad glance.

"That means you'd like to try it again, eh?" the youth resumed. "You'd fail as you have twice. I saw you from the mountain trail to-day. Flash-Eye, before you saw me, and noted your hiding-place. That's how I came to show you but a foot and arm at a time that spoiled your plans. If Catamount Sam wants to settle for this send him to me."

Neither the red or the white knew that at that moment Catamount Sam was beyond settling the smallest account with any human being.

With his last word the Knife-Hunter turned on his heel and went back to the girl on the horse.

"That man will not follow us," he said quietly. "Danger Valley is now clear of enemies, and we must get away before more come. Catamount Sam has left the Indian here to guard, until he returns; that may be soon."

She kept the horse at his side as he walked over the grass to the corral from which he selected an animal of good proportions. He made a sort of bridle from a hitch-strap, and was soon mounted by his fair companion's side.

They threw no backward glances at an Indian who lay at full length near a rough cabin as they rode away.

They might have seen that his tiger-like eyes followed their every movement—yes wondrously bright for a man deathly wounded.

CHAPTER XV.

PIERCE FRANK'S RETURN.

"You have my eternal thanks, Foxfoot. My little gal is precious ez the sun light, and I had sooner die than see her in Ruby Ralph's hands. Shake, my boy!"

Two miles from Danger Valley and four from Bowe Point two persons, a man and a youth, shook hands from their horses' backs, watched by a girl who had recently been clasped in a pair of strong and fatherly arms.

It was a most timely and happy meeting, and the faces of the three beamed with pleasure.

Old Wildfire was overjoyed at seeing his young friend, and in company with the being that then and there cut short his girl-hunt.

"You beat me on this trail, eh, Foxfoot?" the old man went on good-naturedly; "you first found out Catamount Sam's secret."

"Well—Rosa said I preceded you," the boy replied with a smile. "I struck the abductor's trail

fifteen minutes after the abduction, and trailed him to his den."

"To—?"

"Danger Valley."

"Judas! I thought so. I was on my way thar when I met you. I tried to gain ther secret ov her whereabouts from Catamount Sam, but failed."

"What happened then?"

"Thar's no Catamount Sam any more."

There was a certain significance in Old Wildfire's tone that told Little Foxfoot everything, and he asked no more questions on the subject. He said:

"He is one of the men who off-ered to exchange his right hand for the gold bowie. He has lost more than his hand and never got to touch the weapon."

"Ruby Ralph has possession ov yer treasure."

"I know. I shall never turn back without it, an' I only ask a fair show at Bowie Point's thief. I am going back there under cover of darkness for the final settlement."

"You must be car'ful, boy. They're desprited when they're fightin' fer ther gold knife," Old Wildfire warned continuing: "They've been fightin' for Eureka's two treasures. Rosa they will never see again. By ther way, you hev'n't told me all th't happened at Danger Valley. Catamount Sam never left without leaving a guard. You must have found some trouble in carrying away the bird from the cage."

The boy laughed carelessly.

"Rosa will tell you about it," said he, with a glance toward his fair acquaintance.

Nothing loth, she proceeded and told her father all she knew of the incidents connected with the rescue, giving the Knife Hunter a full share of praise for his brave work. A few words sufficed and she had soon finished.

A minute's pause ensued.

Wildfire sat on the gray horse that had belonged to Flash-Eye's big pard, and looked thoughtfully at the ground.

When he looked up he said:

"What would you advise us ter do, Foxfoot? Last night was probably the wildest in the annals of Bowie Point, but we all pulled safe through—now what's to be done?"

"Take the trail there to Gold Eagle, at once," was the reply. "That's th' thing to do. Don't think of remaining in this country any longer than it will take you to get out."

"Ye'r right, Foxfoot, it's the only course," said the Cyclone. "It'd be rashness ter go back to Bowie. Rosa must be got out ov Ruby Ralph's domain ez fast ez hossflesh'll take 'er. An' you?"

"I stay right hyer! It's between Ruby Ralph an' me until one proves eternal victor. If I fail, Apache Steve an' pardus are ready to back me an' take up the fight. They're bound to win back the golden treasure for Eureka at all hazards."

"Wal, you know what ye'r about," was the return. "Thar's no one better able to take care ov himself. I'd like ter stay by you, fer I hev no love for Fierce Frank an' others I could name. I hev settled with one bad man to-day. He is the only one ov the Bowie Pointers thet hez laid han's on my Rose-blossom, exceptin' the Injun lassoer, an' you probably laid him out fer keeps. Thet settl's the score fer me; but I hev a request to make: Give Ruby Ralph one blow fer Desperate Dan! Yer'll not feigt it?"

"No."

"All right. Desperate Dan was grateful fer a favor I done 'im in Nugget City, an' he got killed fer it. Thet's why I want a blow struck fer him."

"Ever' thing of that nature'll be settled, pard," said the youth, with arm-set lips. "A certain young citizen of Eureka, the whitest country in Arizona, will come out ahead in this thief's game."

"I believe it," was the rejoinder. "Now boy, Rosa an' I turn our backs on you fer Gold Eagle. She's had an eventful trip ter the white ranch in southern Eureka—to the home whar her mother died over two year ago; but we'll make it to-day, eh, Rose?"

"I hope so, papa," she smiled, adding: "We must change horses, you know."

"That's so," said Foxfoot. "Wildfire, you'd better take the one I have an' let her take yours. Your animal is better equipped."

The three dismounted, and the change was effected, as Foxfoot had proposed.

"Wal, good-by, kid," Old Wildfire said, again horsed, as he bent over and clasped the Knife-Hunter's hand; "we take up ther trail at once. It don't strike Danger Valley, does it?"

"No, not by a mile to the north."

"So I supposed. You'll be over to see us when you return to Eureka, ov course?"

"Yes," answered the young trailer, as he took Rosa's hand and pressed it in farewell, and his feelings certainly prompted the reply.

A moment later father and daughter rode away to the east, toward the home that she had not seen for two years.

He watched them until they were out of sight, and then turned to Starlac's head.

"I think the danger for them is passed," he murmured; "for me—darkness takes me to the desperadoes' camp, to Ruby Ralph. I'm not a fool to risk myself among them in daylight."

He did not turn his horse toward Bowie Point, but away from the trail.

The sun had crossed the meridian when a man who had a handkerchief tied around his head, dismounted from a jaded horse in front of the Panther's Paw in Bowie Point and entered the door of Pepper Pete's notorious resort.

He staggered in, rather than walked, and when he

reached the bar he snatched up a bottle which happened to be sitting upon it and poured a quantity of the fiery contents down his throat.

At his entrance exclamations had fallen from several tongues.

"Fierce Frank!"

"Fierce Frank it is," was the hoarse response, "an' with a bullet-plowed furrow in ther side ov his brain-basket. Whar's Ruby?"

"Not hyer," said Buzzard Ben, coming forward from among the score of men in the room.

"He was waitin' fer yer hyer, but he's gone now ter his cabin. He said fer one ov us ter come after 'im when yer came."

"Wal, yer needn't go. I'll see 'im whar he's at."

"But ye'r not able, Frank—"

"Ain't I? Don't fool yerself with thet idee, Buzzard," said the wounded tough as he walked unsteadily toward the door in spite of his efforts to hold himself erect. "I've ridden thirteen mile in this fix an' I reckon I can hold out ter reach Ruby. Don't trouble yerselves ter roller me."

The last word was uttered just as he went out the door, leaving the men behind somewhat astonished at his unnatural words.

Fierce Frank soon covered the distance to his captain's cabin, the threshold of which he crossed with the unsteady gait he was compelled to maintain.

Ruby Ralph was there, sitting expectantly on a stool of three legs, with his right arm on a table at his side.

"I'm back, cap'n," said the visitor as he sunk down upon a tripod at the opposite side of the table from the giant rough and looked into his face.

"What's left ov you, ez Catamount Sam 'd say," corrected Ruby Ralph. "Hev you, too, run inter a masked cyclone from Gold Eagle?"

"A cyclone, but not masked, Ruby," was the grated reply. "Shell I tell yer ther story?"

"Yes, yes—go on."

Thus urged, Fierce Frank leaned forward on the rough boards and told the story of his trip to Gold Eagle with Bowie Point's message.

"It was near daylight when I reached ther squaws' camp," he began; "an' I had no time ter lay off afore stickin' up ther notice an' makin' hoof-tracks back ther trail. I stuck up ther paper, accordin' ter orders, in ther pop'lar place ov resort an' with ther product ov our region—ther twelve-inch bowie. When ther sun come up I was some miles out ov ther town. A dozen or t'irteen mile fr m hyer I met a pair thet should 'a' been stopped. Guess who they war, Ruby?"

"No guessin' fer me," cried the stalwart captain. "Who war they?"

"Wildfire an' ther Mountain Rose!"

Ruby Ralph uttered an oath and started from his seat.

"Set down, cap'n, an' wait till I git through!" continued Fier e Frank, and the big rough obeyed him almost mechanically. "I thought thet they should be stopped thet he was abductin' our property, and I he'd out my dropper fer 'em ter run inter. When he saw it, great blazes! he fell forward on his horse's neck, an' in ther wink ov a cat's eye give me a shot thet tumbled me from my animal. I was li e one dead, but I heard 'em ride past me with triumphant words. In a few minutes I was able er tie up my scalp an' drag myself onter my hoss, an' hyer I am. We've lost our grip on ther Eureka Rose, cap'n."

"Y-s, curse it!" Ruby Ralph snapped out. "I thought Catamount Sam hed ther girl. He sneak-ed 'er from camp las' night goin' t'ward ther south, an' 'd swear he wound up at Danger Valley. I hev been intendin' ter go thar ez soon ez you got back."

"It'll do yer no good now," said the wounded messenger. "Ca amount may hev hed her, but he'll never carry another point."

"Why so?"

"He's stark an' stiff by a wall ov rock 'twixt hyer an' ther valley, an' ther gal rode a gray hoss thet was once his'n."

"Thet settles it then!" fl shed Ruby Ralph. "We kin give Wil'fire ther credit ov another shot—one thet did more'n shave a scalp. Yer hev'n't seen ther boy?"

"Foxfoot?"

"Ther Knife-Hunter."

"No, I hev'n't seen 'im. Has he been hyer?"

"He was hyer las' night."

"Then it was 'im thet set Wildfire loose?"

"Buzzard Ben, ther guar', tells thet story, an' I've no cause ter disbelieve 'im. Ther boy will be a fool ter come back ther this wil'cat's camp. His knife's in hands thet'll never lose ther grip on it till they grow stiff. But ther girl, by Jehosaphat! she's gone fer ther time being. But thar's a way ov gettin' 'er ez ther ten-inch treasure was got—yer know how, Fierce Frank. We must let 'er go fer a few days, till after Gold Eagle comes. Yer think thet 'll come, eh?"

"Come?—I've no doubt they'll be hyer afore ther two days they allowed us are up. They'll probably hev more men than Lowie kin turn out. Thet means—"

"Thet we must git ther first shot!" finished the king-pin. "I'll fix that. Thar'll be ther liveliest times in Bowie's record, an' thar's been lively games played hyer. Fer ther present, let's go ter ther boys at Pepper Pete's. Come on. What! se tin' weak? Hyer, I've got some lick'er hyer," and Ruby brought forward a black bottle of goodly size. "Wash ther dust from yer throat with some ov thet," which Fierce Frank lost no time in doing.

Then the two left the cabin, both carrying wounds, and one reeling at times in his walk.

Ruby Ralph had recovered in a measure from the shot that had followed his shooting down Desperate Dan and he walked up the trail with his former stride.

He was still the undisputed leader of Bowie Point, and every man of the town looked up to him as such.

But Bowie Point was doomed!

CHAPTER XVI.

A PLAN INTERFERED WITH.

DARKNESS had again enveloped the land of gold and revolvers, when a horse dashed into Bowie Point from the direction of Danger Valley.

There was no checking hand at the swinging rein, although an Indian lay upon the animal's back and neck and clung desperately to the black mane.

The horse made straight for the Panther's Paw, nor did he slacken his speed as he neared the open door, at which he stopped so suddenly that his red rider was sent headlong ov r his head and landed in the middle of the floor of the saloon in the midst of two-score shirt-sleeved men!

Cries of amazement went up at the unexpected entrance, and Ruby Ralph sprang forward to the thrown man's side.

"Great Jehosaphat! Flash-Eye!"

Flash-Eye it was.

He had fallen upon his arm and leg, and lay as if stunned. There were two dark spots of blood on his shirt, in which were two holes that had been made by good-sized bullets.

The Bowie Pointers gathered around him and lifted him upon a rough deal table—the same that had supported Ruby Ralph's form the night before.

Some whisky was poured down his throat, and soon the red lassoer opened his eyes, which first of all fell upon the king-pin of the camp.

He did not move from the position in which they had laid him, but his looks told that he had something to say, and that at once.

Nor did he keep his rough audience long in suspense.

"Men of Gold Eagle coming!" he said, his black eyes growing bright.

His listeners exchanged quick glances.

"What's thet, Injun?" Ruby Ralph exclaimed; "say thet over ag'in, will yer; mebbe I misanderstood yer."

"Men of Gold Eagle coming!" Flash-Eye repeated. "Tween hyer an' Valley. Be yer 'fore long. Pard's better git ready."

There was silence for a minute, while the red herder watched the effect of his words.

It was the silence that precedes a storm.

Ruby Ralph regarded the informer with glowing eyes and all waited for him to speak.

"So they're comin', are they, ther squaws from ther east?" he exclaimed suddenly. "All right, Injun; I don't doubt yer word. Ther two days they allowed us are not up, but thet notice Fierce Frank nailed ter ther liquor pa adise is whar hez brought 'em hyer ter-night. By Jehosaphat! we'll give 'em thet cold lead picnic we promised, an' in a way they never dreamed ov! Yer saw 'em on ther trail, Injun?"

Flash-Eye saw—an' heard. He was shot this morning by boy Knife-Hunter, an' lay in ranch all day; when sun went down he dragged himself on horse an' started hyer; in trail he saw men comin' from the east, an' heard ther mad talk 'bout Bowie Point an' gold knife. Th y heard horse and ordered stop an' th n fired, but did not hit, only scared hors'. Whar's Sam?"

"Sam's not hyer, Flash Eye," was replied, "so don't strain yer peepers ter git a gaze at 'im. Yer passed 'im on ther trail back apiece; mebbe yer kin guess why he didn't stop yer runaway loss."

Flash-Eye could guess, and Ruby Ralph went on to the men who surrounded him.

"Ther Injun an' no liar, boys; Gold Eagle bez come ter prove which camp hez li'd, an' we've got ter show ther white caliker er fight. It's all fer ther ten-inch treasure—yer kin see it in my belt hyer; we've got ter give it up er fight; it's with you fellers which we shell do."

The speaker's penetrating glance swept the crowd.

"We fight, seven days out ov t'er week!" Fierce Frank exclaimed, and his words were echoed by a score of voices.

"Then fight it ar'—fer ther old camp and ther gold bowie! Fight!—by Jerusalem! we'll open ther ball! Victory lies in our havin' ther fu'st shot an' ter git thet we've got ter shoot from whar we're not expected. Forewarned is f'rearmed, eh? Thanks fer yer warnin', Flash-Eye. We're armed with shco'ers thet nev r miss, an' we're goin' ter sh'ot from an unexpected point. Ter-night decides who's goin' ter be th r overlastin' owner ov ther Arizona treasures, an' Bowie's ther head candidate!"

"The boy Knife-Hunter took the Eureka flower from Valley," said the Indian.

"So I tho't, Flash-Eye," Ruby Ralph responded. "But we kin git 'er again, ez ther gold bowie was got, ef we git the fu'st shot ter-right. We've got ter git thet, pardus—we've got ter shoot on sight. If thar's any talkin' ter be done it's got ter be done afterwards. 'Shoot fu'st an' talk afterwards' is ther motto we want ter-night. Do yer all agree ter thet?"

"Thet's what we do," was the reply in concert from a score of whisky-washed throats, and the words were followed by subdued curses and whispers.

There was not a traitor to Ruby Ralph's cause in the room. With one accord they backed him as if he were leading them to a fight for their own lawful rights, and not to the possession of a mere stolen knife, which might cost them their lives in the end.

"Then thar'll be no word-slingin' when ther cowards an' whisky-bums come," the captain went on. "We'll do it right now, in gittin' ready fer ther com'n' pistol pic-nic—fer ther shootin' the's goin' ter come from whar it's not expected! Ther fust thing, gather up ther Injun thar, a couple ov you fellers, an' carry 'im ter my cabin. We've got no more us fer 'im hyer."

Before the wounded herder had time to say any further words had he so desired he was lifted from the boards and borne swiftly out the door and down the trail.

In the cabin mentioned he was lowered upon the rude cot in the darkened corner, and left to himself. But a few moments after, the door was opened and in sprang a stalwart and familiar figure, which halted at the red-skin's side.

It was Ruby Ralph, and as he bent over the cot he drew somehting from his belt.

"Hy-er, Flash-Eye," were the words that followed this act, "hyer's somethin' ter keep fer me till her men ov Gold Eagle go back. It's ther gold-handled treasure ov Arizona! We don't propose ter allow 'em ter git it is far, an' it'll be safe in yer red hands hyer. What do yer say? I'm liable ter gounder, yer know, an' so may any ov ther rest ov us. An' thet knife must never leave Bowie."

"Flash-Eye k-ep!" exclaimed the Indian almost eagerly, and the elegant handle was shoved into his clasp the next minute.

"Yer know what it means ter lose it," said the desperado as he turned toward the door, as if in haste to return. "I'll tear open yer red throat if yer don't hev it when I come back! This is a circus thet permits ov no side-shows, an' yer've got in yer fingers ther chief attraction on ther bills. Good-by, Injun; I've got a scheme ter shoot from whar we're not expected!"

With the last words still issuing almost in a hiss from his lips Ruby Ralph sprang back out into the starlight.

He went rapidly back toward Pepper Pete's. Perhaps there was no time to lose. If he had devised a plan to get the drop on the men from Gold Eagle he must hasten the preparations for its execution; they might be nearer than he supposed.

If he had stopped and listened just outside the door of the cabin he had just left he might have heard from the cot inside a grunt of satisfaction, almost delight. Flash-Eye seemed to regard the intrusting to him of the knife a streak of unlooked-for luck. He examined it intently and with eyes that sparkled with pleasure at its possession.

For fully ten minutes he lay in his outstretched position without another sound escaping his lips. His wound did not seem to pain him; if they did he gave no word or sign to show it. That his mind, during the period that succeeded Ruby Ralph's exit, was employed in the formation of some wild plan or plans, his final action showed.

Ruby Ralph had long since reached Bowie Point's liquor resort, when the Indian with whom he had intrusted the knife for which the camp was to fight, rose slowly from his couch and staggered from the shanty.

He seemed to have regained some of his former strength, for, after a moment's pause in a listening attitude, he set off in the direction taken by his big captain some time before.

But he did not go fast, and he reeled dizzily in his walk at frequent intervals; he had shoved the knife into his belt, and the consciousness that it was there very probably added lightness to his feet. It was for it that he had resolved upon his present course, the carrying out of which might mean his death. He had forgotten that he was desperately wounded, that the dark demon was even then tugging at his life-strings, and that no difference how successful his undertaking he was bound to lose his grip on the gold prize in the end.

Ruby Ralph had made a mistake in confiding the latter to the care of his red herder; the temptation was too strong for his Indian nature and the thought of escaping from his pards with it in his possession was now uppermost in his mind.

The wild desire gave him strength, and he was able to increase his gait as he advanced. But he moved cautiously and was on the alert for the first sign of enemies now, pards twenty minutes before.

His horse still stood before the Panther's Paw, and that was necessary to his escape, and must be obtained.

Flash Eye reached a position just opposite the saloon door, determined to take a survey of the inside ere venturing to secure his animal, when out filed the whole crowd of occupants, headed by Ruby Ralph.

The proceeding was a surprise to the Indian, but he remembered the captain's last words to him in the cabin, and concluded this must be a preliminary movement to the carrying out of the plan.

As the roughs poured out of Pepper Pete's he heard their mad oaths and saw that every man was armed to the teeth, and he shrunk back against the dark logs of the shanty by which he stood.

But he realized that he would be discovered unless he moved, and quickly, for Ruby Ralph and his men had not paused, but were coming almost directly toward him, along the trail that ran east from the saloon.

They would elbow him as they passed, and he had sense enough to know that, in their present excited state, they would very likely kill him if they laid hands on him there, with the gold bowie that had been intrusted to him in his belt. They would at once suspect the truth, and nothing that he could say would save his life from their vengeful fury.

Without losing time, the red herder stole around the corner of the shanty, and with it between him and the men he had turned against for the ten-inch treasure, he went ahead as rapidly as he was able.

He had placed another shanty behind him when he could tell from the sounds that the roughs had passed the place where he had been lying.

He knew that they were coming on with long strides, and with their burning eyes fixed on the starlight trail before them.

He must turn aside at the first opportunity, and allow them to pass him. But they were so close behind that without a convenient shanty between them his figure would be seen and shot down.

On he went to the next house that lined the trail, but he began to lose strength. This was more than the red traitor had bargained for. Rounding this, he saw that the next one in the line was almost twice the distance that the others had been.

Like a hunted wolf, he kept on with irregular steps, and with his hand clutching the gold bowie. His lips were drawn tightly over his teeth, and his eyes might have been mistaken for coals of fire.

The plans that had been formed on Ruby Ralph's couch had been interfered with; Flash-Eye, the lassooer had laid his game, but he was destined never to live to play it through. By his own act he had turned the hands of his pards against him, and they would cause him to lose, and forever, at the very outset.

With fast losing strength he had almost reached the cabin, when behind him was a ringing shot, which was followed by the clicking of two-score pistols.

With the death-rattle in his throat the Indian went forward upon his face.

"We shoot on sight!" came from the giant, who halted for a minute at the head of his men, with a smoking revolver in his hand. "This is ther night when bullets, not words, does ther talkin'. Advance, men; thar's no more in sight."

With weapons cocked and in hand, the desperado strode forward, and halted within five feet of the victim of the captain's shot.

Ruby Ralph fearlessly turned him over upon his back and scrutinized his face.

"Heavens!" he ejaculated, going erect. "It's Flash-Eye, and—Jehosaphat! he's got ther gold knife in his grip!"

He bent down again and wrenched the bowie from the already stiffening fingers, and the men near him heard his teeth snap as he straightened up.

CHAPTER XVII.

BOWIE POINT AND GOLD EAGLE MEET.

The shot fired by Ruby Ralph, and which ended Flash-Eye's worthless life, was heard by men whom the Bowie Pointers thought two or three miles distant.

There were at least sixty of these men, broad-shouldered and bronzed—veritable mountaineers.

They were just entering the outskirts of the town, and from their actions they appeared to think that desperate results would follow their appearance.

When the sound of the shot rung upon their ears, they halted and snatched weapons from their belts, ready for anything that might follow.

"It means nothin'," said the man in the lead, as nothing more was heard. "It's an hourly sound in this God-forsaken place. But we'll see thet they get enough ov it ter-night ter make 'em sick o' powder. Our notice said ter old bowie er death."

"We'll nev'r go back without ther ten-inch treasure," Apache Steve, said a man at his back.

"No!" hissed Apache Steve to his followers, only fools threaten, men act; we're hyer with droppers ready ter act, ter fulfill our threat an' get ther knife, er whip these coyotes out ov their dens. Are they expectin' us? We've got to find thet out. If thet was a spy on ther trail back thar, our comin' on ther quick-step may yet cause a surprise. But what of thet? Thar'll be a fight, an' we'll all see who lied! True, ther Eureka Rose is out of ther clutches, but they've still got the knife, an' thet's got ter be returned at all hazards. We're gettin' inter ther camp now; thar's no need ter tell yer ter hev yer droppers ready."

No, there was no need to tell them that; without exception every man carried in his right hand a heavy revolver, and many a finger touched a trigger as they advanced.

They had not come there for play, but to pit themselves against Ruby Ralph and his notorious pards, and to settle forever who should be the owner of the gold-handled bowie.

They crept forward like a pack of wolves nearing a sheep fold. As they proceeded, the dark shanties began to grow more numerous, and their tread became almost noiseless.

Suddenly Apache Steve paused again and threw up his hand to warn silence.

"I heard a voice just on ther other side ov thet cabin ahead thar. Listen!"

The men had stopped instantly, and they bent forward in listening attitudes.

"I'm glad I shot the red traitor!" came to their ears in coarse, mad tones, which more than one in the party recognized. "We thought he war back thar in ther cabin with two bullets in his life-box, but hyer he was makin' fer ther mountains with ther gold knife in his grip. I say I'm glad I shot ther red traitor! If he wasn't already growin' stiff I'd plant another hole in him just ter let ther starlight through! We war all pards hyer, but thet skunk hez forfeited his claim ter a half-way burial. Wal, I can fight better with ther knife in my belt, an' we're out hyer ter fight—ter shoot from whar we're not expected!"

They heard every word and when the voice ceased they impulsively went forward a step; but Apache Steve motioned them back.

"Wait—we'll hear ther remainder ov this funeral. Thar's another voice."

They listened again, and what they heard brought oaths to their lips.

"Mebbe ther bums from ther east heard yer shot, Ruby. What then?"

"They're not in two mile o' hyer, Fierce Frank. Thet shot 'll never reach ther ears. If it did it'll more'n likely scare ther cowards back to ther dens."

"But they may be nearer than yer think," said Fierce Frank's voice again.

"Ov course," was the reply, "but they're far enough away ter give us plenty ov time ter arrange ther ambush. We must go further out ov camp fer thet—ther further out, ther greater ther surprise. Besides, it'll save us buryin' ther carcasses in Bowie, an' we don't want 'em hyer. We'll plant 'em whar they fall, ef ther buzzards and wolves don't get ahead ov us."

A coarse laugh followed this, that made the teeth of the sixty dark eavesdroppers fairly crack with rage.

"Spread out!" ordered Apache Steve. "When they come around ther cabin, git ther drop on every man. We'll see whar ther surprise comes in! If I'm n't mistaken, ther buzzards an' wolves will hev a chance ter git ahead ov somebody!"

Noislessly the men sprang into position on each side of the trail, facing the shanty that stood fifty feet away between them and the men who thought them two miles from the town.

They had not long to wait.

There was the tramp of heavy feet for a few seconds and then around the corner of the cabin came the rough citizens in a body.

They continued advancing for several steps before they comprehended their position; then they recoiled with surprised oaths.

"Heavens! Ther galoots ov Gold Eagle are hyer!"

"Galoots, if yer want it, an' we're byer!" was the retort. "Ther two days we allowed yer may not be up, but we're hyer by special invitation! We've come ter attend ther cold-lead picnic, in ther interest ov Foxfoot an' Eureka. You know what we want—what we're goin' ter hev."

Well—did they know!

They drew themselves up like baffled beasts, compelled to face the revolvers which every man of the visitors held directed at them.

They were completely in a trap—there had been a surprise, but it was altogether different from what they had anticipated.

Their hands the first instant had fallen on the weapons in their belt, but they dare not draw them covered as they were by six-shooters, which they knew would speak death at the first aggressive move.

"We've not got ther Eureka Rose," Ruby Ralph sent through his teeth, as if he misunderstood their meaning.

His answer was a jeering laugh, and:

"Don't we know thet? We n't et Wildfire an' ther little beauty safe on ther road home, no thanks ter you gophers! No, we're not hyer fer her, but fer ther gold bowie you just took from ther red traitor back thar. Yer'd please hand it over, or thar'll be ther biggst buzzard ferst hyer when ther sun rises ther gold hills ever centaled! Thet's straight talk, but it's what our notice said, an' we're hyer ter back every word ov it."

Ruby Ralph could not doubt this last assertion. Should he shoulder stood the men from Gold Eagle with contrived weapons that did not waver. They had come there for a purpose and they were proceeding with it in a manner that should guarantee success.

But there was a bull dog obstinacy not only in Ruby Ralph but in his minions generally that was not by any means ready to yield.

The big captain seemed at a loss what to reply for a moment, and then his old recklessness returned.

"Thar may be a buzzard feast, but when ther sun comes up ther pards ov Bowie 'll be slingin' mountain dew over Pepper Pete's bar! You've come hyer, not fer ther old knife, but ter die with yer boots on! By Jehosaphat! we're wildcats hyer, an' we don't scare inter nothin'! Draw yer weapons, boys; we'll not waste any more words. 'Shoot fust an' talk afterwards' is our motto. We'll show these cowards thet thar's not a liar belagin' ter this camp—thet ther pistol pic-nic promised will be held in full!"

Apache Steve seemed on the point of laughing at the idea of their fighting against such odds, but a movement he detected on the part of his foes to carry out their leader's command caused him to go forward a step with his finger at the trigger.

"Draw an' die!" he shot through his teeth. "You fellers came out hyer ter form an ambush, but thet failed an' yer' at our mercy. It's ther gold knife we want. Throw thet at our feet an' we're wilin' ter pocket yer insults an' turn our backs on Bowie. You know ther alternative. Only fools threaten, men act; we've done our threatenin', now we're goin' ter act."

There was no response in words to this, but what followed was unexpected by the Gold Eagleites; they had in a measure mistaken their men.

All at once the hands of the Bowie Pointers went up and the succeeding instant there was a score of revolver shots.

The shots were as sudden as they were terrible, and a number of the Eureka men pitched forward with cries!

Nor did the firing stop; shot followed shot in

quick succession, and for a moment it seemed that the rapid work would rout the surprised knife-hunters.

Then they remembered that they held revolvers in their hands, cocked and leveled, and that they had but to press the triggers. To think was to act, and they began emptying their big six-shooters with the rapidity of experts, and the Bowie Pointers reeled back from the deadly flashes!

For a minute there was a perfect rain of bullets on both sides. Men tumbled in every direction, and the scene baffled description.

Such a storm of lead had never before visited the camp of the mountain roughs.

The quick opening of the fight by the Bowie Pointers had been effective only for a moment. The others had rallied, and their shots were fast and deadly.

Their bullets went true to the marks, which were outlined quite plainly in the sunlight.

Rough after rough went down, wounded or never to rise again.

The rapid firing on both sides lasted but a minute, and then the Bowie-men began taking to their heels to get out of range. But the shooting in their rear did not stop, and many were shot down in their efforts to escape.

But a number did escape, and among them was the man who had the gold knife, Ruby Ralph himself, as was afterward proved by an examination of those who had fallen.

It was Gold Eagle's victory. They did not stop firing until the last one of the fleeing desperadoes had disappeared.

Then the air rung with shouts of triumph!

But they gave place to disappointed cries when the discovery was made that Ruby Ralph, the very man they wanted was among the missing.

Suddenly the rapid clatter of hoofs came to their ears and put a stop to their exclamations of chagrin.

The sounds told them there was but one rider and they waited intently for him to come up.

Soon the dark figures of horse and rider came in view, and more than one man recognized the boyish horseman.

Shortly after the galloping steed was brought to a halt not many paces from where the men from Gold Eagle stood, and Little Foxfoot the Knife-Hunter leaned forward in his saddle.

"Apache Steve."

"Foxfoot—I'm glad to see yer, boy," and the hands of the two crossed.

"You fellows are a day ahead o' time," the youth went on. "You've got the gold bowie?"

"No!" Apache Steve returned; "the boss thief got away."

"J richol I thought the hunt was ended. I captured a man on the outskirts who had a bullet in his shoulder, and who said every man but himself had gone under. I was coming into the town when I heard all that firing, and I thought the Old Boy himself was turned loose. How many of our pardners went down?"

"A dozen o' ours, an' over twice that many o' Ruby Ralph's. There was a perfect cyclone o' death ragin' hyer for about a minute! I never heard o' the like! Ther bullets would whistle by so close they would almost take a feller's breath! But we got thar, we whipped ther gophers out o' their dens. We're goin' ter burn ther dens now fer vengeance, an' make ther vict'ry complete!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

FOR THE GOLD BOWIE.

APACHE STEVE kept his word; when the gray light of morning came, Bowie Point's cabins were a mass of smoldering ruins, and Bowie Point was only a name and a thing of the past.

The men of Gold Eagle had gone, after their terrible destruction of life and property, and to all appearances the vicinity was entirely deserted.

But on an eminence a couple of miles from the scene a cluster of mad-looking and discomfited men watched the smoke that curled upward from the burned cabins.

There were a dozen or fifteen of them—all that were left of the parous of Bowie Point.

They were headed by Buzzard Ben, and more than one furious oath escaped their lips as they surveyed the result of the stealing of Eureka's golden treasure.

Pepper Pete and Fierce Frank were not among them, neither was Ruby Ralph; but for to the eastward of them the latter rode at a gallop over the trail that led to Danger Valley from the south.

The captain's clothes were freely spotted with blood, while his face was haggard and his eyes bloodshot.

Although his horse was well-blown he urged him forward unceasingly, as if something important rested on his being at his destination in a certain time.

As the sun came up he dashed down into the valley and up to the door of Danger Valley ranch.

Just then his eye fell on the corral, and he uttered a surprised exclamation. Not an animal was in the inclosure! He looked up and down the grassy vale, but they were not in sight.

He had no more than made this discovery when the door, in front of which he had drawn rein, was flung open and a youth of familiar figure stood on the threshold with a weapon extended into Ruby Ralph's face!

The big captain could not withhold a fierce oath of surprise.

"Home again, Ruby? I've been expectin' you. I've waited here just to see you. I want my gold bowie!"

There was the light of triumph in Foxfoot's eyes

as they met those of the desperado and received a look that would have made the timid recoil.

"I got to Bowie too late for the fight last night," he went on, not receiving any reply. "If I had been there you wouldn't have escaped as you did. I almost knew you would come here so, while the pardners of Gold Eagle went back to Eureka with the spoils of their raid on your ranch, I remained here to welcome you home."

There was a tinge of sarcasm in the youth's tones as he uttered the last words.

"It looks like welcome, by heavens!" growled the desperado. "Ye'er a fool ter stav hyer, Foxfoot; what could a baby like you do with ther best man thet ever entered Bowie Point?"

"I'll show you before we part," was the quick answer. "I haven't hunted you as I have to fail at such a time as this. You had better apply the name 'fool' to yourself for coming back to Danger Valley; you might've known a foe would look for you hyer."

"I did know it, but what o' that? I come back prepared; I've got two droppers an' ther gold bowie in my belt, an' I'm ther wildcat o' Arizona! Last night I saw ther flames eat up Bowie Point; I saw a doz toughs with blood on their sleeves go stragglin' down ther trail, but I didn't let on thet I wasn't stiff in ther midst of ther fire with a Gold Eagle bullet in my brain. I've turned ag'in ther pardners o' Bowie; I swore thet in big cath's las' night in sight o' ther flames thet chewed up ther Panther's Paw. I wish ther Eureka men'd got in a dozen more shots! I'm through with ther whole crowd; I come back hyer fer what's in thet cabin, an' with thet an' ther gold bowie I'm goin' ter vamoose ther k ntry. Yer'll nev r git yer knife boy; put up yer shooter an' go back ter Eureka. Yer musn't try ter stop me now; I'm a r'iled wildcat!"

The mad captain glared down into Foxfoot's face with the ferocity of the beast he called himself. But the boy met his gaze fearlessly.

"I go back with the knife, never before!" he said. "I've got y uncovered with a revolver that don't go down until I have my stolen property return d. Ther's death in there, and—vengeance for the killing of Desperate Dan!"

"Desperate Dan?" echoed Ruby Ralph.

"Yes; Wildfire told me to strike one blow for Desperate Dan. You know what that means better than I do myself. But the knife is what I want. Two days ago Fierce Frank and Catamount Sam told me they would lose their right hands as would every man in the district, for the gold bowie. They've lost more than their right hands, and still never got the bowie. Your case will be the same, unless that piece of property is returned to its rightful owner!"

There was a menace in word and look that the desperado did not fail to perceive. But the demon in his nature seemed roused.

"No more palaver!" he hissed suddenly. "Stand back an' let me in thar! I'm hyer on cizness bent, an' I allow no babies ter interfere! Put up yer dropper an' stand aside! It's death ter disobey!"

There was no reply, except a look of defiance and hatred.

With a mad oath the desperado jerked a weapon from his belt, and shoved it with the quickness of light down into the Knife-Hunter's face!

He pressed the trigger, but at that instant his arm was knocked upward; but at the flash and report, Foxfoot staggered backward, and fell behind the door!

Ruby Ralph swung himself from his horse with an exclamation of delight, and bounded into the room, with the smoking revolver in his hand.

Then he uttered a smothered cry.

The Knife-Hunter leaped forward from behind the door with his weapon outstretched!

His forehead and hair were scorched with powder, but triumph and revenge lit up his eyes.

Ruby Ralph had no time to use his revolver again; Foxfoot was upon him.

"For the gold bowie!" escaped the youth's lips, and with the words came the pressing of the trigger, a loud report, and Ruby Ralph reeled away and fell to the floor.

The boy sent up a ringing shout of victory, as he sprang to the rough's side and scratched the gold-handled bowie from his belt.

It was regained at last, and the thief had paid for the theft with his life.

The king of ruffians had reached the end of his trail, and Desperate Dan and the insult to Eureka, all were avenged.

When the Knife-Finder (hunter now no longer) rode from Danger Valley ranch looks of triumph were cast over his shoulder, from under a powder-scorched forehead, which was covered by a bullet-bored sombrero.

Ruby Ralph had been quick, but the boy had been quicker.

Gold Eagle was never again called upon to take up arms to fight for the gold bowie. Its ownership was never thereafter disputed, and it remains to-day the priceless property of its original possessor.

Gold Eagle is a peaceful and thriving little city, and Apache Steve is its ruling spirit.

But Bowie Point never arose anew from its ashes, and, as we wrote in the beginning, there is now no semblance whatever of the storied mountain camp, except perhaps the ruins of the few anties that escaped the flames on that wild night of conflict.

Buzzard Ben and his pardners were never afterward heard of in that region, they probably finding life more congenial in other parts.

It is safe to say that Fierce Frank, Pepper Pete and the red lassoe, Flash-Eye, did not survive the

night when Gold Eagle and Bowie Point met in that desperate and bloody affray.

Catamount Sam found a grave beside a rock-walled trail.

As to Ruby Ralph, his oath to be the eternal proprietor of Eureka's treasure was never carried out, nor did he live to assert his claims with the prize they had fought for at his side, as was his stated intention.

In southern Eureka are two beautiful ranches almost in sight of each other. One is owned by Mr. Wilder Firey and the other by his son-in-law, Mr. Elmer Fox.

Little Foxfoot, or Elbert Fox, and the beautiful flower of the gold hills Rosa Firey, are man and wife, blessed in all their relations of life, and still young.

Foxfoot, as their happy father, Old Wildfire, is often wont to repeat to his friends, came out ahead in the big game, and won for himself both of THE EUREKA TREASURES.

THE END.

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